THE
BRIDE OF A DAY

F. DU BOISGOBEY.

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Fortuné du Boisgobey was a popular French sensational novelist. He was born in Normandy in 1824, and died in 1891.

The translator, Henry Llewellyn Williams, is not otherwise known.

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(*GRIPPE-SOLEIL*)

A STORY OF PARIS LIFE

BY

FORTUNÉ DU BOISGOBEY

AUTHOR OF

'THE GOLDEN TRESS,' 'THE CRIME OF THE OPERA-HOUSE,' 'THE LOST CASKET,' 'THE CAT'S-EYE RING,' ETC., ETC.

Translated by

HENRY LLEWELLYN WILLIAMS

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THE BRIDE OF A DAY.

CHAPTER I.

A WEDDING MARCH.

DOES anybody still remember the 'Singalese Village' at Paris? It was only last summer, and it was 'the great attraction' during three months. The Jardin d'Acclimatation was never empty, for all the town went to see the strangers there. The sight was well worth the trouble of going to it.

These authentic Buddhists were really characteristic, with their bronzed complexion, gaudy trappings, strange music and dances, richly caparisoned elephants and humped oxen. The spectator could believe himself on the Island of Ceylon, although the miniature railway brought you hither from the Porte Maillot in ten minutes.

The Singalese Show went away in the autumn, and nobody repined. What became of the Orientals on returning home, quitted to gain a few rupees by showing themselves to the Western barbarians? Nobody knew, and nobody wanted to know. *Où sont les neiges d'autan*—'Where is last year's snow? Melted; and shows vanish and leave not a wrack behind.

But that visit to France was the point of evolution of a tragedy not forgotten by the participants in it.

One September Saturday there was a crowd around the enclosure wherein the odd procession of the Singalese unfolded itself.

Blue was the sky, warm the air, and complete was the illusion. One could imagine one's self at Colombo or Pointe-de-Galles, on the road up to some pagoda. But the majority of the lookers-on, drawn hither by pure curiosity, did not fully value the quaintness of the spectacle; they came here as to see any novel sight, and never dreamt there was a large island abroad where such scenes are daily ones. Parisians are noted for their ignorance of geography.

And it is true that Saturday is not the fashionable day at the Parisian 'Zoo;' but that on which the wedding-parties of the lower middle-class, in their round of sight-seeing, take in the Gardens. This terminates in a feast at a restaurant, after the traditional promenade in the Bois de Boulogne, awaiting the former of which the bride parades in her nuptial attire: white veil and dress, and orange blossoms being 'the thing.'

Upon the present occasion, there was a full dozen of these wedding-parties serpentining through the bantering throng; not the least of the fun being to quiz these blushing novices from Hymen's altar. Some were uncomely; but there were pretty ones who were gazed upon by preference and offered opposition to the Singalese: notably one, a fair girl with black eyes and bright face, hanging free-and-easily upon the arm of a tall, lusty fellow —no doubt her new helpmate; she frequently laughed to show her dazzlingly white teeth. She was coquettishly dressed and booted. Her husband had no style about him, but his countenance was winsome enough; and the following guests presented a fair appearance.

To what social stratum did they appertain? Probably to the lower middle-class; for they were neither artisans nor tradesmen, albeit still less noblemen. Perhaps they were retired manufacturers, heads of works and factories, contractors, and the like. The bride came of quite another stock, for she had blood, and a free carriage contrasting with the vulgar and starched-up air of the guests of both sexes.

Two gentlemen had been making the above observations during the last quarter of an hour; one was young, the other better on in years but not at all elderly, and both were stylishly built. The younger, indeed, in a brown Newmarket and pointed boots, looked like a perfect fashionable; the other seemed a military man, and wore a red ribbon in the button-hole of his tightly buttoned-up frock-coat. By their aspect and bearing, a Parisian expert would have judged them to be members of the three or four leading clubs, where nobody enters ‘without a clean sheet,’ or, in other words, proving his birth and fortune are stainless.

‘Good-luck at last!’ the be-ribboned gentleman had exclaimed. ‘Now here comes a really pretty girl! What do you say to that, Savinien?’

‘Not bad,’ muttered the other, ‘milking’ his sprouting moustaches.

‘Not bad! Why, she's lovely! I defy you to find her match among the reprehensible hussies who delight you, or among theatrical beauties—ay, or society ones.’

‘You cannot keep cool, poor old Octave! but that's all the fault of coming home fresh from Tonkin. All the sex look lovely to you; but in six little months, when you shall have settled down in town again, you will call them all “pestiferous”! Bless you, I have been through the mill myself!’

‘At twenty-three? So much the worse for you, dear boy. You had better revive your spoilt taste by going for a month on the banks of the Red River or the Clear River, in the land where the belles chew betel-leaves all day and blacken their teeth with lac.’

‘Thanks, awfully! but I prefer the young ladies of the *corps de ballet*. But, to return to our mutton—I mean, lamb—I grant she is nice enough; but she's not so very fresh as she looks.’

‘Now, what do you mean by that?’

'Only that her happy swain may fancy she is a violet out of some untrodden glade ; but I will lay a hundred to twenty, in louis, that I have seen her in public somewhere—on the stage of some third-rate music-hall or minor theatre.'

'That's possible, after all, and I do not see how it matters to me ; but do you mind my seeing a little more of her ? That sweet, lovely face is quite a treat to an old soldier fresh from Indo-China, and I would like to have all the enjoyment out of it that I can get.'

'Just as you please,' replied Savinien in an uninterested way. 'Even that will be less of a nuisance than looking at these apes in red and yellow dresses and their trained animals.'

Everything was 'a nuisance' to Savinien de Coulibœuf, a Mancean noble, perverted by metropolitan fast life, and completely 'used up' at three-and-twenty ; in which he did not a jot resemble his cousin, Captain Octave de Parentis, a man of thirty-five, who had remained young in head and heart—particularly the latter.

So the pair went on after the wedding train, which had strung itself out along the palings enclosing the Singalese.

The procession had come to a stop, and its breaking-up, and the variegated actors in this fairy-burlesque march in the open air were striking up acquaintance with the spectators through the fence; they pleaded for cigars, and they were fairly overwhelmed with them, to the high amusement of the bride. Before her, one strapping blade, naked to the waist and of Florentine bronze hue, had stationed himself to devour her with a stare, jabbering unintelligible sentences which might be Bengali, Tamil, or any of the hundred idioms spoken in the Indies.

'Look there!' remarked Coulibœuf, with a chuckle; 'there's a wild man of the woods of your own opinion. He is downright gone on the little lady in the orange-blooms, and making a declaration of love out of the Ceylonese dictionary. He must be pouring in hot shot, too! for they know nothing about platonic love in that latitude. The husband suspects as much, anybody can see that, for he looks daggers. How much he is like a blacksmith out for a holiday! It would be good fun to cut him out with his wife.'

'I advise you not to try it on; he would crush you flat with one punch of that fist.'

'Don't you be alarmed. I am not going to pick any quarrels with that Hercules in the white tie. But I am sure that the bride is giving me the wink.'

'What a conceited ass you are!'

'I'll lay you ten louis that she will accept my address-card.'

'You are getting to be an old song with your perpetual wagers. I do not want to win your ten louis, but I can assure you that, if the woman is looking tenderly upon anybody, it is not you.'

'Do you mean to say it is on you?' ironically queried Coulibœuf.

'No. It's the Singalese she is eyeing; and small blame to her, for he's a great deal handsomer than we are—he's simply splendid.'

'Splendid? He looks to be moulded in chocolate.'

'Beauty is but skin-deep, and colour does not matter. He resembles the Indian Bacchus. But you guessed rightly, he is paying compliments to the bride.'

'Do you mean to say you understand his gibberish?'

'No; but he peppers it now and anon with scraps of English—"Pretty girl," "I love you," and such-like expressions, which I believe the lady understands, as she is graciously smiling upon him.'

'By Jove, he's offering his hand to her! Well, this native of Ceylon is "cheeky" enough! but she does not take it—I fancy she is afraid of him.'

'Look at that idiot of a husband offering the Singalese a cigar—but, stranger still, the Singalese refuses it. I gather he is more civilized than he looks. He has understood that this fellow is the master of the young woman who has captured his fancy, and he is not willing to accept anything from him; he is jealous, and, were his eyes pistols, his rival would have a bad time of it.'

'It's all the same to me. It's a dreadful nuisance altogether here. Let's be off!'

The captain shrugged his shoulders instead of replying. But he and the intolerable Coulibœuf were not the only persons to be amused by this pantomimic scene. The bride laughed away heartily ; the husband pretended to make merry ; his friends joked among themselves in dubious taste ; and the boys, who had managed to creep up in here, began to sing to a popular music-hall tune :

> 'Will he kiss her ? won't he kiss her ?'

The incident was becoming comical, and the lookers-on were the more entertained from its not being down in the programme. The fellow-countrymen of the Singalese poked fun at him, and one old *bonze* of the troupe darted stern glances at him ; moreover, several privileged beings, who had been passed into the reserved space, came up to see how the episode would end.

On the other side of the palisade, a worn-out looking old man, who might be the father of one of the spouses, approached them and tried to get them away ; but the lady said in her sweetest voice :

'Oh, let me have another look ! They are so funny !'

'Whew ! this is getting warm,' muttered Coulibœuf.

'I would like to see them closer yet,' went on the young bride. 'Why cannot we go inside the rails like those gentlemen and ladies ?'

'Only members of the Acclimatation Society are allowed in there,' returned the old man tartly.

'Pooh! I dare say if the man at the gate were tipped——'

'No, my dear Thérèse. But don't you see that everybody is laughing at you and at Joseph? This is enough of it—come and see the seals!'

'Her name is Thérèse,' murmured Parentis.

'And the hubby is called Joseph,' added Coulibœuf, in a low voice. 'That fills the measure! But what a capital opening for you to make the girl's acquaintance. If I were in your place I would slip a gold piece into the hand of the manager of the company, and ask him, under the hand, to let you and your friends go by. The bride would follow you with enthusiasm, and the guests would let themselves be carried on.'

'By Jove, it's a good idea!' agreed the captain, between his set teeth.

'The manager, I suppose, is that tall griffin in military costume, who is berating the over-gallant Singalese at this very moment. You need only flash the coin at him from this distance.'

'How queer this is! I fancy I know the man, and yet—no, I do not mistake! Anyhow, we'll soon learn,' whereupon he shouted, 'Halloa, Corporal Bask-in-the-Sun!'

The man thus hailed by the officer, to the great amazement of the hearers, lifted his head and faced round to the latter, squeezing against the rails. He was an odd-looking man, almost as much so as the Singalese, although his skin and dress were European. He was tall, thin, bony, and as swarthy as a Turco; long red moustaches divided his visage in halves, in the upper part of which gleamed fiery eyes, and over all stood out commandingly a formidably aquiline nose; it was the head and appearance of Don Quixote. He wore a green uniform and a red fatigue-cap, and carried a cane as if it were a sword; on his breast was the military medal for long service and gallant conduct. It was the veritable type of the soldier of fortune, become the showman of wild men and elephants.

At the first glance he picked out Octave de Parentis, and, leaving the Oriental whom he was scolding, he ran over.

'Is it you, captain?' he ejaculated. 'How very glad I am to see you again! I thought you were still out in Tonkin.'

'Just got home, three weeks ago, on a six months' leave,' answered Parentis. 'Well, old Grippe-Soleil, what the deuce are you doing here? I was told that you went to seek your fortune, after leaving the regiment, in Japan.'

'So I did go there, captain, but never found it. The fickle jade on the unicycle does not let herself be caught by iron-gray veterans like yours truly! I will tell you all about it, if you will do me the honour to walk inside this cordon. I am on my own ground, but I am on duty, and I must not go away from my sentry-go for the time being.'

'I ask nothing better than to go in there; but I am not alone,' remarked Parentis, with a glance at the bride, who guessed his meaning and thanked him with a smile.

'Oh! you can bring along your friends, captain.'

Parentis determined to take the plunge; but as it would not do to make the invitation direct, he was very careful not to address the young woman. The fatherly man was not far off, so, raising his hat to him, he said:

'Pray excuse my indiscretion, monsieur; but I happened to hear your daughter——'

'Daughter-in-law,' interrupted the old fellow.

'I beg your pardon! I say I happened to hear the lady express a wish to see the Singalese at less distance. This is a fine fellow who has served in the army under my orders, and he offers an invitation which it may be agreeable to you to enjoy—including the lady, your son, and all your friends——'

'Why shouldn't we?' replied the good old soul, visibly flattered. 'I have not the advantage of knowing you; but from an officer of our army I can accept such an act of politeness. I am a patriot, and patriots should not stand on ceremony.'

'In that case, come along, monsieur.'

'This way,' called out the obliging *cornac.*

They all proceeded towards the entrance, thirty paces beyond, before the elephants' stables.

The husband gave in with very good grace, and his friends followed him; they were not numerous, say a dozen altogether—only three of the gentler sex. The recalcitrant Brabantio, whom the captain had coaxed over, marched at the head of the cortège. The mob grumbled heartily and not a little at this favour; but the bride was so pretty that nobody actually protested.

'Wasn't mine a good idea?' whispered Coulibœuf, who had hooked on to his friend's arm. 'You have been presented at court—I may even say, to *court* — and I would not lay two louis upon the future conjugal bliss of our unfortunate Joseph. I have a right to a reward. Try to get us asked to the wedding-feast, where we will have a good laugh at them. If you succeed, I'll cry you quits. But I do not want to prevent you carrying on the game, so I shall leave you, to go and examine those Singalese yonder who are executing a native step. I am interested in dancing, and ought to make a comparative study of it.'

The captain did not retain his cousin, having other cares than to listen to this 'dude's' conversational rubbish. He longed to find a way to speak with the young woman, as she appeared more and more charming; and he also wished to chat with Corporal Bask-in-the-Sun, otherwise, by his true name, Jean Caradoc, formerly a corporal in the Spahis. He had once pulled his superior out of an *arroyo*, or torrent-bed, wherein he was on the verge of drowning. This rescue was only a repayment, however, inasmuch as, at Bac-Ninh, the captain had caught a bullet in his arm whilst delivering Caradoc, fallen into a Chinese pirates' ambuscade.

After there has been an exchange of such services, comrades are not sorry to let the tongue wag whenever they meet, and wherever, even though it be in the Zoological Gardens.

The ex-corporal itched to do so, and he would gladly have dispensed with the presence of the bridal party, for he imagined Captain de Parentis was of the same mind, and he saw that the honours of the reserved space were really only tendered to the pretty bride. But he hoped that, after showing the band all the native curiosities, he would get a chance of confabulating with his old leader.

The father of the bridegroom did not lose a minute in proceeding with the usual formalities for such cases.

'Monsieur,' he commenced, with a solemn air, 'allow me to inform you whom you are addressing. I am Jacques Bonhomme, a manufacturer of articles in bronze, in the Rue des Trois Bornes. I dare say you know my name?'

'It figured in the chapter about the Wars of the Peasants, in the "History of France,"' rejoined M. de Parentis smilingly.

'Ay, I know that. In the Middle Ages they called all the peasants who revolted against their liege lords by that general name. I take pride in it. But I was not alluding to that glorious memory, but to my having been a candidate for the Municipal Council, last year, and my name was placarded on the walls of my ward.'

'Excuse my ignorance, monsieur,' said the officer, with difficulty containing his impulse to laugh, ‘ but at election-time last year I was on the frontier of China.’

‘Just so! I forgot I was addressing one of the defenders of the Republic in the extreme East. No doubt you did not read the newspaper out there, and could not know. However, my candidature fell through, owing to the unspeakable manœuvres of the opposition. But this is a digression. All I wanted to do was to assure you that you were not obliging one of the ordinary men in the crowd. I have done, so now I will introduce you to my son Joseph, who received his education in the Great Central School. He is manager of my works, and will be my successor some of these days—the later the better—ha! ha!’

The heir-presumptive of the manufacturer of bronzes d’art held out his huge paw to Octave de Parentis, who pressed it, saying to himself:

‘Poor little woman! she cannot be much flattered at being styled by such a common name as Bonhomme.’

She had blushed on hearing her father-in-law’s ridiculous speech, and her eyes seemed to ask the captain to overlook her new relatives being so uncouth.

‘Allow me, for my part, to introduce myself,’ said the Spahi’s once superior officer: ‘I am Octave de Parentis, captain in the Native Sharpshooters, and most happy in having the opportunity to please the lady, and all you ladies and gentlemen.'

The bride blushed her deepest and prettiest red, whilst Parentis began to wonder why she had no parents or near-of-kin beside her. The three women here were old, common, and badly dressed, and could not be of her family; he divined that this union with an orphan, probably dowerless, had nothing in it to please the tribe of Bonhommes. But this was not the moment to inquire about so delicate a point, and he was puzzled what to do with the wedding-party he had charged himself with.

'Captain,' said the ex-corporal, 'would you like me to let the lady and the company know what there is to see here?'

'Certainly, old Bask-in-the-Sun.'

'What an odd name!' murmured the young woman.

'A nickname, madame; the wearer will himself tell you why it was given him.'

'It almost tells its own story,' said the ex-Spahi merrily. 'I was very fond of the heat when I was a lad, and I marched away eagerly to play the lizard in the broad sunshine. But I had more than all the sun I wanted in Africa, Cochin China, and Tonkin, and the longing has left me. But the nickname sticks, and it pleases me when my old officer calls me by it.'

'This sentiment does you honour, my brave warrior,' said Bonhomme, sen., who might have been more appropriately named Prudhomme, after the prosy typical character invented by Henri Monnier; 'but, without being considered inquisitive, may I inquire how a son of Mars, who fought beneath the banner of France, comes to be a showman of East Indians?'

'It could not be helped, monsieur,' sighed Bask-in-the-Sun; 'a man has to get his living the best way he can in this world. I went through fifteen campaigns, and was wounded three times—one less than the captain—and was named twice in the order of the day. All this did not prevent my being "branded out of service," as we say in the cavalry, when I reached forty, and I had never risen to being an officer or even quartermaster.'

M. Bonhomme nodded his head with a knowing air, saying to himself that this never-promoted soldier must have unrevealed vices.

'Then, I carried my knapsack pretty nigh everywhere. I have been in Japan, China, and Java, and had a try at all trades—but only the honest ones, mark you! as I may boast. In the last place, I landed in Ceylon, where an Englishman who has a large property took me on as bailiff. When the Singalese were engaged to come to France, the speculator for the tour, knowing that I was well acquainted with the natives and spoke their tongue, offered me a good place as acting-manager. I accepted, and here I am. I wanted to see Paris again before my grave was fired over.'

'Then you belong to Paris?' inquired the manufacturer.

'I was born in the Rue Galande, close to the Place Maubert—to serve you, ladies and gentlemen. Would you like to see how these savages do their cooking?'

'It would be highly interesting,' gravely uttered the old gentleman; 'it is always useful to learn how people feed themselves.'

'For my part,' ventured the bride, 'I would much like to know what the man said to me whom you took to task.'

'He was paying you compliments, my little lady; but these fellows spice them so hot! Whew! they are red-peppered, like the boiled rice they eat with their fingers. Luckily, you could not make head or tail of the stuff, but I understood it, and I hushed him up. Anyway, he's gallow's meat—fit for very little else. I suspect he is a Thug.'

'What's a Thug?' exclaimed the younger Bonhomme.

'Well, Thugs are rogues whose trade it was to waylay travellers on the highway in India, and strangle them when they could manage it. The British Government flatters itself an end was put to them, but, bless you! there is always some root escapes when you are weeding.'

'Ugh! you give me cold shivers down the back by suggesting the mere thought. He does wear a face that I would not like to run up against in a dark nook on a lonely road. He has tigerish eyes, and—oh! it seems to me he is looking at me.'

'Oh, there's not a bit of danger here.'

'What does he do in your troupe?'

'His calling is that of the snake-charmer.'

'Snake-charmer!' ejaculated Joseph Bonhomme. 'That is a trade not down in the Commercial Directory.'

'How does he do it?' inquired the bride.

'I really do not know, my little lady,' was Bask-in-the-Sun's reply. 'These chaps have a lot of secrets which we Europeans cannot get hold of. A hundred times have I seen their juggling feats, and I am none the wiser. They can do anything they like with the vile creatures, and never get bitten. It's a "big sensation," as you shall see.'

'Is he going to perform before us?'

'Yes, madame, if you like. He was engaged to give his show in public; but the Paris police prohibited it as being too dangerous.'

'Do you mean to say the snakes are poisonous?' questioned the husband.

'Poisonous! rather! In plain words, my dear monsieur, a bite of a cobra will kill a man in less than ten minutes, which is almost as quick as getting a chassepôt bullet square in the chest.'

'Did you say, monsieur, that this Singalese juggles with cobras?' interrogated the young woman, who had never lost sight of the snake-charmer.

He had gone to set his back against a tree, whence he watched the visitors with disquieting persistency.

'He twists them round him for necklets and bracelets; he tosses them up and catches them on the fly by the tail.'

'He must have a pluck!'

'Pooh! it's his business. He is a *sapwallah.* In India there are thousands of them. Oh! you should see them perform in Bombay, in August, the day of the Feast of Serpents. They come into the town by two or three hundred, in a band, every man with his basket of cobras—a score apiece. They gather on a large open space, where jars of milk are brought, and they let out the snakes, which drink till they have had enough. The dinner is offered them to win their friendship—it's a fact! Ha, ha! the stupid Hindoos imagine that they will tell of the grand blow-out to the other cobras, and that the vermin, affected by this kindness, will never do any mischief to their benefactors. In the evening on their way home, they scatter them all over the country.'

'Well, that's a country where I'm not going to plant myself!' cried out the younger Bonhomme, with a horse-laugh.

'Every people has its peculiar customs,' observed his father gravely.

'Now, gentlemen, if you feel like it, Baroda shall perform before you. He is called Baroda because he was formerly in the service of a Rajah of

Baroda. It's impossible to pronounce his own Singalese name. His show will entertain you.'

'But you said the police had forbidden it.'

'Yes, yes, in the open air, because the reptiles might escape and slip through the palings. You can imagine the effect. Great guns! everybody would take to his heels, and there'd be a score of people crushed. But inside the bamboo hut he lives in, Baroda can do as he likes. He has to take care of his snakes, and he does not withhold them from a show in private to gentlemen who pay handsomely for it. Baroda is filling his purse every day, and he is a money-spinner, I warrant ye! For all his gingerbread phiz, that fellow has an account at the principal bank in Ceylon, and if he wanted to have a spree in Paris or London he needn't ask anybody to lend him the cash. But he's miserly, and does not care a fig for anything save his serpents.'

'Everyone to his taste,' said Joseph, chuckling sneeringly.

'This barbarian is an orderly fellow. How many men who call themselves civilized can say as much?' sententiously declared old Bonhomme.

'Is he married?' asked the new Madame Bonhomme.

'Nobody but Old Scratch knows about that,' returned Bask-in-the-Sun merrily. 'Baroda may have a dozen wives in his own country, but he has not brought them along.'

'Not even one?'

‘Upon my word, not one! The other Singalese have wives, and more often two than one, but Baroda lives quite alone. In any case, he does not “chum” with his comrades, who detest him. He passes his time in making eyes at the pretty French girls, when they come—which I understand, for the Singalese are regular monkeys. Just look at the lot dancing over yonder.’

‘The fact is, they are very ugly,’ said the captain.

‘Your friend does not appear to be of your opinion,’ commented the bride, pointing to Savinien de Coulibœuf, who was rapt in contemplation behind a group of copper-hued bayaderes who were capering to the notes of a shrill music only twenty steps away.

Parentis took care not to go and disturb his cousin, occupied in studying Singalese choregraphy. He even esteemed himself very lucky in being momentarily delivered of the fop’s company. Yet he also thought that the conversation with the wedding-party could not be much further prolonged. The new Madame Joseph Bonhomme had captivated him at first sight. She was the ideal woman of whom he had dreamed since he left France, and he cursed the fate which made him meet her under such conditions, married only a few hours since to a man she could not care for.

After having led a lively life in town when younger, Octave de Parentis had become sentimental in Tonkin. Isolation and the fatigues and dangers of guerilla warfare had made another man of him. He no longer sought mere pleasure, but happiness, and he pondered melancholily over what bliss this adorable black-eyed blonde might have bestowed on him if he had found her on his path earlier. Yet he might be deceived on this point, forasmuch as all he knew of her was her bewitching face, and her sympathetic golden voice, which went straight to his heart. He did not know what she was before wedding this man, or how she had passed her maidenhood. But he did not reason. He had received that sudden and violent shock which is so justly termed love at first sight. Weak as a child before Thérèse's lovely eyes was this valiant soldier, who had charged the terrible Black Flags a hundred times sword in hand.

He forefelt that this vision, only seen in a glimpse, was about to vanish.

He was in no mood to engage in one of those comic adventures which fill the novels of plebeian life, and he nowise cared to be invited to the wedding banquet, as the facetious Coulibœuf wished, to hear amateur song-singing, and see the bride's garter cut up and shared among the guests. Therefore, why should he any longer inflict the torture upon himself of keeping near the wife upon her husband's arm ? So he cudgelled his brains to find some fair excuse to part from the nuptial train, which, for that matter, only wanted to wander over the lawn.

CHAPTER II.

A SUDDEN ELOPEMENT.

BASK-IN-THE-SUN came to his old captain's help.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' he said, 'you can roam wherever you like. I am obliged to watch over my savages. You can hunt me up when you have seen everything; and, however little it will amuse you, I will get Baroda to perform before you.'

The guests of the bronze manufacturer hastened to accept the proposal.

Father and son, after fresh hand-shaking with their obliging introducer, took the head of the file which proceeded towards the picturesque camp, where the Singalese were cooking rice in huge coppers.

Alone of all, the bride turned round to have another glance at Octave de Parentis.

'Heigho, captain!' said Bask-in-the-Sun, 'how slow those holiday-makers were going off! Bless your heart, I guessed straight away that the bride had hit you hard, and I am very glad to please you by letting them in; but I am still gladder to speak with you alone, for I have a long story to tell since I left the army.'

'Tell away, tell away, my hero!' said Parentis gaily, 'and have no fear of boring me. You are an old brother-soldier, and it interests me to learn where you stand. I only know, so far, that you are not doing badly, since you have a good post—and savings, eh?'

'Humph! the savings are not immense. I was a long time fighting the wolf, and I have been making money only these six months. But, however, I have got something in the larder, and I may be on the road to becoming a millionnaire.'

'Thunder! I should be delighted; but I really cannot think of you, my boy, as a capitalist!'

'No more can I. Anyway, that's not a sure thing, as I never was a lucky dog!'

'Whence do you expect this uncertain fortune, then?'

'Ah! now we come to the point. It's a rum story, captain. You know I am a Parisian——'

'I always suspected so; but I heard you say it just now, when you told that good old soul that you were brought to light in the Rue Galande.'

'That's the truth. My father was factor in the Great Central Market, and would have left me a nice snug sum if I had not cut up so many shines. But what's the wonder? Youth must have its fling; and mine passed in eating my hay in the green. At twenty-five, when I enlisted, I was out of money; and afterwards, though I strove hard in every country where I was ordered about for ten years, I never caught anything but the military medal—that is, a hundred-francs pension to salt my soup.'

'The reason of your not doing better, my lad, was your being too fond of absinthe. You are not pleasant company when you have been drinking, and you used to drink six times a day in Africa. Do you remember the sergeant of marines whom you pitched into at Saigon ?'

'If it had not been for you, captain, I'd ha' been shot. I shall never forget how I got let off, because you begged me out of it to serve in your free company. To you I owe turning out a good soldier ; and now I drink nothing but water. But I am riding down a side road. All that flourish of trumpets was to bring in the tune : on my mother's side I had an uncle whom I never knew, because he went off to California when I was at nurse.'

'The old yarn of the uncle who makes a fortune abroad, eh ?'

'The same old yarn ! I never heard anything about him, and, of course, was not reckoning on his leaving me anything, when I read — only yesterday, in the newspaper—that he had died and left four millions of francs——'

'To whom ?'

'To nobody. He died suddenly—and no will was found.'

'But you are his sole heir ?'

'The only one. The worst of it is that nobody knows what has become of his fortune.'

'What does it consist of ?'

'The newspaper says it is so far unknown.'

'Tut, tut ! my brave old Bask-in-the-Sun ! what you are telling me is too fanciful. A fortune does not disappear without leaving some traces—dash it all! It is more likely your Californian uncle had no money.'

'I beg your pardon, captain. He came back to France last year, and then he told everybody that would listen to him that he had four millions in stocks and shares and bonds—French ones, too—but it appears that none of them can be found.'

'Because proper search has not been made. When his effects are inventoried up——'

'That will not take long—for he had none; he was staying at an hotel.'

'The story is getting weaker and weaker! A millionnaire who stays at an hotel and hides his treasure so well that nobody can find it—it is absurd!'

'I repeat what I read in the papers.'

'You read some cock-and-bull story hatched in the brain of a penny-a-liner "short of copy;" and if you rely on this inheritance, you run a great risk of disappointment. To begin with, how can you be sure of this Californian being your uncle? You did not even know he existed.'

'I did not; but I knew his name—my mother's; it was Chamboulive, like the gentleman's whose death was reported in the papers.'

'Nothing proves it to be the name.'

'Oh, the Chamboulives are not to be counted by the dozen, and Léonard is not a very widespread Christian name.'

'Well, that's true enough; and, after all, it is not totally impossible it is he. I suppose you have already made inquiries?'

'Not yet, captain. I am on duty now, but I shall have a day off to-morrow. I shall take advantage of it to go to the Grand Hotel.'

'Oh! he was stopping there, was he? Well, if I can give you a helping hand, I shall do so willingly.'

'Catch me refusing, captain! when I do not know anybody in town, and I never was good at business.'

'I will gain some information at my club and elsewhere. I may even come across some persons who have heard this Chamboulive spoken about; and, moreover, I will send you to my solicitor, who will show you what formalities you must go through.'

'You have a solicitor, captain?' said the ex-Spahi corporal, with admiration.

'Good gracious, yes! You may well be astonished, for I have never been rich. But I have a little estate in Normandy, and a town house. Hence I have to keep a lawyer to look after my petty income; I could not do so myself, for, since I left the St. Cyr Military College, I have always served out of France.'

'The same here, since I made ducks and drakes of my money. Excuse the comparison, captain.'

'If you should miraculously inherit, you would only be puzzled about one thing,' remarked M. de Parentis, laughing. 'What will you do with your millions, if you ever pocket them?'

'Oh, I should not be puzzled. I still have teeth to eat cake with; but I fear I shall have none. I would make a better use of them. I committed follies when I was young, and I would like to repair them.'

'By paying your debts? That's handsome of you; but I do not suppose they run to four millions.'

'I have none at all; for the excellent reason that, after my father's death, nobody would trust me. But, twenty years ago, I behaved very badly to a woman, and if I could find her again——'

'You would enrich her by way of recompense? I am not the man to turn you from that course. A woman whom you deceived and left in the lurch, eh?'

'It is an old story, which I will tell you later, captain, if you will allow me to see you again.'

'Whenever you like, my old Bask-in-the-Sun. Any morning, up to eleven—and you will kill two birds with the one stone, as I also put up at the Grand Hotel, like your presumptive uncle. I am even surprised that I did not hear of a very rich man dying under the same roof. But I will put some questions to-morrow; and, if you look in then, I will present you to the hotel manager, who will give you particulars.'

'I thank you, captain. Here's your friend looking after you: he has had enough of our bayaderes.'

On came Coulibœuf, with his hat set back, his glass screwed into one eye under the arched brow, and his air as wearied as ever.

'The dancing-girls are quite *deadening*,' yawned he; 'their monotonous swaying to and fro has given me sea-sickness. Eh? why, the wedding-party is no longer here!'

'It is not far away.'

'Is it your intention to wait for the troop of good citizens hereabouts? I forewarn you that I do not care about seeing them again; not I! It strikes me you have dropped the little bride. Then we shall not get invited to the dinner, at Gilet's—it is sure to be at Gilet's. What a pity, for it will be jolly funny! I would have "made an exhibition" of the Benedict and his papa—they look such simple *codgers*. However, since that sport is struck off the card, I shall break off myself. I must be at the club by six, to give revenge to that Russian, of whom I won two thousand points yesterday at Rubicon. Coming, Octave?'

The captain did not hasten to reply. He had perceived the young bride coming up, surrounded by her party, which had ended the tour of the Singalese curiosities. She no longer was on her husband's arm, and the retinue was not marching in good order as at their arrival. They had become scattered, by some going to look at the elephants, some at the male and female dwarfs, others at the juggler who squatted on the grass and kept in air a multitude of heterogeneous articles with unparalleled dexterity.

Baroda, the snake-performer, also espied the bride; his eyes glittered, and he darted instantly within his bamboo pagoda, against which he had been leaning.

'He's too funny altogether, he is!' cried out Coulibœuf. 'He's running away because he is jealous about the beauty; it cuts him to the heart to think that big blockhead of a husband is going to take her away.'

'Baroda will have to have another sight of him,' said the old corporal, 'if the lady asks to see him perform. I promised to make him give a show for her.'

'Oh, he's not going to require pressing, for here he comes again with a basket under his arm. Does he intend to offer her Easter eggs? that would be highly polished politeness.'

'Eggs! no, no,' muttered Bask-in-the-Sun, with a wink. 'In that basket will be at least one cobra.'

'A cobra? what sort of a thing is that?' sneeringly inquired the officer's cousin, who was not by when the showman had spoken of the Feast of Serpents; 'some kind of monkey, eh? Oh, there goes the image in chocolate upon a bench before his hut, and he's crossing his legs. He fancies himself fetching, in that tailor-like attitude, I dare say, and wants to show off to the best advantage. That's not all; he's drawing a flute from his waist-cloth—he's going to play some music now! Oh, this tops the climax!'

Grippe-Soleil had frowned on seeing the snake-charmer climb upon the cane platform and get his reed flute ready. He knew that it was used to call the snakes, and, as the exhibition in the open air was prohibited, he apostrophized Baroda in Singalese. The answer came in guttural syllables, which probably signified : ‘ Do not worry yourself for me ! I am not going to break any orders, and I am going again into my hut when I ought to do so.’

At this juncture up came the bride, smiling, and the captain could not do less than bow to her, and pay her a parting compliment.

‘ Have you seen everything, madame,’ he asked, ‘ and have you been interested in what you saw ?’

‘ Ever so much, monsieur,’ she replied quickly ; ‘ and thank you to whom we owe all the pleasure we have seen, all—except the serpents,’ she added bluntly. ‘ What has become of the—the man who shows them, and who fell in love with me ?’ she added, with a burst of fresh, youthful laughter which charmed Parentis.

‘ Hang it all !’ muttered Coulibœuf, ‘ the timid young thing has dropped her timidity among the Singalese ; she does not keep her eyes down now, and she laughs like a frisky matron. Stop, stop ! where have I seen her before ? I am sure I have heard that silvery laugh somewhere.’

‘ Madame,’ said Bask-in-the-Sun, ‘ Baroda is waiting for you, on his perch there ; and, if you would like to go into his kennel with the gentlemen, he will make his beastly creatures dance before you.’

Thérèse questioned her mate and father-in-law with her eyes, as they came to join her. They appeared rather lively, having been to the canteen under some trees, whilst she visited the native dwellings.

'Poor girl!' thought Parentis. 'Into what hands she has fallen!'

'It ought to be curious,' hiccupped the younger Bonhomme.

'It is well worth seeing,' subjoined his progenitor.

'Then come with me, gentlemen,' proceeded Bask-in-the-Sun; 'I will give orders to Baroda.'

These orders were badly received. Either from the performer disputing the manager's authority, or his having private reasons for remaining in his place, there began a discussion comprehended by nobody but the pair concerned. Plain it was that Baroda refused to go indoors, and that the question turned upon his snakes, for he kept slapping the cover of their basket every instant, and offered to put his flute to his lips. He seemed to say to the manager: 'If you keep on plaguing me, I shall call out my cobras to fly at you.'

In any case, the veteran appeared but slightly to heed this menace, as he never ceased to abuse his mutinous subordinate in Singalese. Whilst they were thus wrangling, the wedding-party half formed a ring around them, and the husband was pushed forward into the foremost row beside Coulibœuf, who was no doubt plotting some practical joke upon him, and never suspected there was any danger in approaching the basket. The bride had remained a little behind, so that the captain, unable to restrain himself, profited by the nick of time to whisper:

'I adore you!'

At this moment, the innocent Jacques Bonhomme mechanically laid his hand upon the lid of the basket, and Baroda set to playing a weird, soft air on his reed. Bask-in-the-Sun dashed up to snatch the instrument out of his hand, but he arrived too late.

'Oh! look at the great leech!' exclaimed Coulibœuf.

This ridiculous interjection made the captain wince as he stood by the young wife, who was confused but not angered by the abrupt declaration of love. If Parentis had seen the basket, which was masked by the clustering wedding-party, he would have understood how excusable was Savinien de Coulibœuf's error. Nothing more closely resembles an enormous leech than a *cobra di capello* when inflating its neck so that it forms a hood out of which emerges its flat, triangular head. It was a hooded snake, indeed, which, attracted by the notes of the infernal Baroda's flute, raised itself up out of a little flap in the lid, which it had lifted sufficiently.

Joseph Bonhomme had not noticed it, and he had no time to withdraw his hand before he uttered a shriek of anguish. The cobra had bitten him in the thumb.

Baroda swiftly grasped it by the neck, plunged it back into the pannier and slapped down the little osier wicket which its head had raised for the sortie; but his zeal came much too late. The hapless Bonhomme was already tottering back to fall into his father's arms, livid. His legs gave way under him.

Grippe-Soleil rushed up and shook his fist at the emotionless serpent-charmer, and roared at him:

'You rascal! you did that on purpose!'

The victim was shoved, or rather carried, inside the pagoda.

The lookers-on from outside the enclosure had not understood the incident, and Thérèse, still behind the guests, was no better enlightened.

But the captain divined what had happened; and besides, Coublicœuf, who was beating a retreat, said to him with an attempt to be merry:

'This is a precious start! The married man has been stung by the serpent of the chocolate man.'

'Will you hush, you idiot?' growled Parentis angrily.

It was no longer time for silence to be useful. The bride had heard it, and she clearly remembered what Bask-in-the-Sun had stated before her about the cobra's bite being always fatal, usually swiftly so. She turned pale, and she would have fallen if the captain had not been at hand to sustain her.

'Take me away,' she sighed.

The very thing Parentis longed to do—but he could not decently take advantage of this mishap to elope with the young bride, who would be a widow in a few instants, and he had to limit himself to supporting her in his arms, and trying to comfort her with kind words. He assured her that the accident to her spouse would not have any ill result, although his impression was to the contrary, but the pious falsehood had no success.

The nuptial party had crowded into the pagoda after the wounded man. Bask-in-the-Sun had followed. Baroda, aware of his guiltiness, had fled with his basket under his arm. None remained but Couliboeuf, who no longer cracked jokes since his cousin had snubbed him, and he was not much at ease in other respects from his growing belief that serpents are not healthy neighbours. Judging the place to be no longer tenable, he prudently slipped away out of the enclosure, leaving his kinsman alone with the bride. She had some strength return, and the budding respect of connubial life urged her into starting away.

‘ No, no,’ she said ; ‘ I must not go away—I must see my husband.’

At this juncture there came out of the pagoda the showman, who grimly cried out to the captain as he ran by : ‘ He hasn’t a quarter of an hour to live !’ and the father, crazy with grief, his eyes starting out of his head, and ugly words on his lips.

‘ I knew very well that this marriage would bring bad luck on my poor son,’ he shouted to

Thérèse ; ' it is you who are the cause of his death, with your flirting with everybody ! I forbid you going in near him ! Let him die in peace ! I curse you ! Get you gone, and never let me see you more !'

And away he went, calling aloud for a doctor.

Among the spectators was a medical student, who immediately offered his services, and M. Jacques Bonhomme hastened to bring him into the pagoda, where his unfortunate son was already on the verge of collapse.

Since the exasperated father-in-law had roughly driven the young wife away, Octave de Parentis, without being considered unmannerly by men of the world, could escort her hence.

' Madame,' said he, in the most respectful of tones, ' I am at your orders. You have heard what was said ?'

' I did,' she made answer in a hollow voice. ' I did hear, and I know what I must do. Give me your arm and let us be off.'

Thérèse seemed transfigured, her gentle countenance had suddenly assumed an energetical expression, which completely changed the style of her loveliness. Her eyes flashed fire, and in them was to be read the irrevocable resolution she had formed.

The officer took care not to try to make her renounce a decision allowing him to hope that this meeting with the woman of his dreams would have a happy outcome. He did not reproach himself at all, not considering he was really bound to look after the man and console his father, neither of whom inspired any other sentiment than pity. Besides, he could not be of any help to them, and Grippe-Soleil was at hand to attend to the assistance to the wounded man—quite superfluous, alas! since there is no efficacious remedy against the bite of a cobra.

So the captain escorted the young woman out of the enclosure; she trod with a firm step, and did not weep, although she was much moved.

Occupied in asking questions about the accident, the throng let them go by without too closely looking at them, and Parentis led his companion along the road circling round the Waterfowl's Pool. He was in a hurry to be afar, and it was not yet a fit time to ask Thérèse whither she wanted to betake herself. As he skirted the palisades, he fancied he saw the dreadful Baroda watching them through the bars, and he thought to himself:

'I believe if he could get one of his snakes to bite me I should not live to old age; but I'll settle any differences with that scoundrel by-and-by. The main thing now is to get out of these gardens.'

Coulibœuf, who had fled like a hare, would probably be at a good distance, an absence his kinsman did not regret, from his being in no humour to listen to the silly jesting of this dandy, or to take him for confidant, if the adventure turned out as he hoped.

The captain and his *protégée* walked rapidly without exchanging a word, and the passers-by must have been amazed to behold a bride in her wedding attire on the arm of a gentleman in morning dress, who had no appearance whatever of being her husband or even a wedding guest.

One blackguard, indeed, muttered as they went by:

'Halloa! here's an orange-blossom blown out of her hubby's garden!'

Under any other circumstances the officer would have chastised the impertinent cur; but all he did, as things were, was to make the untimely observation the text for saying to his companion:

'We cannot go far like this without exposing you to further unpleasantness. Would you not like to be put in a cab at the entrance?'

'Oh, yes,' the young woman replied quickly. 'I am in a hurry to get home.'

At this, Parentis looked at her steadily: a bride has no residence but her consort's, and he did not like at all to take her to Messieurs Bonhomme and Son, manufacturers of bronzes, Rue des Trois Bornes. She understood this, and instantly added:

'I mean, to *my* home. I did give notice to quit at my rooms before marriage, but they are still in my possession, and my furniture is there.'

'Will you allow me to see you there?'

She hesitated for a second, but her answer was:

'Yes, monsieur. To me it little matters now what my neighbours will think. I must let you know beforehand, though, it is a great way off—on the Boulevard Beaumarchais.'

'Even if it were at the world's end, I would not let you go home alone—dressed as you are.'

'It is true,' murmured the other; 'brides are never seen going home alone——'

She did not finish, but expressive tears came to her eyes. The captain marvelled who the girl could be who lived by herself before pairing off with a Joseph Bonhomme. She did not say, 'I am living with mother,' or 'with my relations,' but 'her home' and 'her own rooms.' Was this union merely the legitimatization of an illicit connection with the unhappy Joseph? Parentis was inclined to fear as much, but he durst not yet put a direct question.

They found a cab before the garden railings, and he stepped into it with Thérèse, to the profound stupefaction of the men who open the hackney-coach doors, and who had seen the wedding-party arrive; now they saw the bride going away without her spouse.

'What's the number of your house on the boulevard?' asked the captain in an undertone.

'119, Boulevard Beaumarchais,' responded she in a loud voice.

The commissionaire called out the address. Decidedly she did not care about hiding that she had changed her partner in the Jardin d'Acclimatation, for the very vehicles which had brought her party were stationed round about here, and the hackney-coachmen lounging on the kerbstone could plainly hear the direction given. The cab slowly drew out of the ruck, and rolled on towards Paris at the hand-trot of a lumbering horse. At this pace Parentis and Thérèse would enjoy an hour's *tête-à-tête*, but the most embarrassed of the twain was the gentleman, assuredly.

The woman seemed resolved to keep silence. Her eyes had become tearless again, but her contracted features expressed suffering. It was not really her place to break the ice, and Parentis did not know what to say to her. It was nigh to cruelty to question her at such a moment, and ask her to relate the story of her marriage and of her life, and he had not the heart to do it. Perhaps the wisest plan would have been to drop the adventure, which opened so badly only to finish worse, and take leave of the lady when brought to her own door. But the more he regarded her, the stronger he felt that it would be impossible to renounce seeing her again.

The silence was prolonged until, slow-going as was the horse, the drive touched its end. If Coulibœuf could have seen his cousin, drawn back in his corner like a shy lover, he would have heartily laughed. The captain himself thought it ridiculous.

'Here we are on the Boulevard Beaumarchais,' said the blonde who had bewitched him. 'I only thank you now for having accompanied me; but I do not cry quits yet. I want to speak seriously with you, and so I beg you to come indoors with me. I am not going to detain you long.'

Her hearer did not expect this invitation, delivered at point-blank without any preamble or ambiguity. Thérèse offered him what he had been hesitating to suggest; and from another woman so much willingness would have probably shocked him. But from her, he was ready to accept anything with the best opinion, and it pleased him that she should act and speak out frankly, instead of mincing and beating about the bush like a grisette pretending to be coy. The speaker's tone was so clear and her gaze so open that he did not suspect her of any underhanded design. Was this not, besides, the natural sequel of the singular drive, and, since she had consented to take it alone with him, would she compromise herself more deeply by receiving him in her own rooms? After what had passed between them, an explanation was indispensable, and it was better not to defer it.

'Thanks for your confidence in me,' said Parentis simply.

The cab already grazed the kerbstone like one going to draw up soon, so that No. 119 could not be far. The problem now was to manage the setting down without collecting a crowd, sure to be astounded at seeing a bride appear in full costume.

'We have arrived,' resumed Thérèse. 'Be the first to alight. Whilst you are paying the coachman I will run across the pavement. You can join me on the stairs.'

A little astonished at so much coolness, the officer obeyed. He drew out his purse and opened the door; whilst he settled with the driver, Thérèse flew like a meteor, so as to disappear under the carriage-archway of a respectable-looking house. Nobody thought of following her, as the mere glimpse of her costume had not greatly attracted the attention of such persons as happened to be in the street. There is no law against a lady wearing white on a fine, warm September day, and none had time to distinguish the characteristic features of the attire—the veil, wreath, and satin slippers.

CHAPTER III.

BROKEN WEDLOCK.

THE most risky step was taken, and the captain had only to rejoin the bride. So he went indoors, without troubling what he should answer if the doorkeeper challenged him on his movements; but the man was in his den, and did not disturb himself.

He ascended the staircase boldly, without knowing on what landing he should overtake Thérèse, who had had time to go up two or three flights, and she had not thought to tell him on what floor she lived. It was on the third she was awaiting him—on the very threshold of an open door, and she stood aside at once to give him room to pass by. He did not delay to be entreated.

She closed the door after him, and ushered him into a rather good-sized room, lighted by two windows upon the main street; it was hard to tell the recent use of the place, as the furniture was stacked up higgledy-piggledy in one corner, and covered in holland—no doubt in view of the intended removal. There was not one sofa, arm-chair, or even ordinary chair to be had unless it was unswathed. Here was a strong proof that Thérèse had spoken the truth about her having married on the bound, so to say, without time to arrange her new home.

She may have slept in this room, occupied by herself alone, over-night, but she must have dispensed with assistance on the wedding-morning, for anyone like a dressing-maid was conspicuous by her absence.

When a girl of the lower middle-class marries, she has some relatives, if no mother, who gather around her and do not stint help and advice. Yet it seemed as if Thérèse, before espousing M. Bonhomme, lived 'like a strong-minded woman.'

She removed her orange-blossom wreath to put it on the mantelshelf, and said, with a bitter smile:

'It was written that I was to remain a maid.'

The word rang false in the hearer's ears, and he wondered for the first time if he had not met a hoaxer.

'Phew!' he thought, 'not one regretful word about her husband! She takes up the part of widow much too jauntily.'

'I divine what you think of me,' said this bride, so rapidly consoled at no longer being one. 'You are astonished to see me indifferent to the fate of an honest fellow who did me the honour to marry me. It was precisely to explain myself to you on this point that I begged you to come here. You told me in the Jardin d'Acclimatation that you adored me. Do you wish to believe that I did not take in earnest this random declaration? However, even though you do love me, as I long to be loved, I can never be your toy of an hour.'

'You may be my wife of forever!'

'Would you marry me?'

'Why not?'

'Because I have no money, no family; and even if these wants did not check you, I shall remain what I am. I do not care to marry.'

'Yet it strikes me you have——'

'Yes; I have married a man whom I did not love—could not love. My dying mother made me pledge myself to marry, and I have fulfilled my pledge. Heaven has unbound me by widowing me on my wedding-day, so that I am now free to follow my vocation.'

'May I ask what that vocation is?'

'I am upon the stage. I was there when M. Bonhomme induced me to leave it.'

'Oh!' said the officer, a trifle disenchanted by this declaration, as open as unexpected.

Thérèse clearly noted the effect produced, but she went on without losing countenance.

'If I am to see you any more, you must know all about me. Will you hear my story?'

'Very eagerly!'

'It is not a merry one, but it is short. I am a love-child, and bear no other name than my mother's, which is Tercier. Last year I lost her—cast off by my father—whom I have never seen, from his having left my mother before my birth. She toiled for me her whole life through, and died in harness. She was a professional singer, and gave lessons in a school where I was educated—probably through charity, in some degree. I had a very nice voice, and I dreamed of succeeding on the stage. My mother did not try to prevent me. By experience, she knew to what perils I would be exposed; but she also knew that I was firmly resolved to conduct myself creditably, and she depended on my not failing. She was right to depend on me. Heaven knows what courage and firm will is needed against one's succumbing; but never have I deviated from the right road.'

'Hence, M. Bonhomme——?' began the slightly incredulous Parentis.

'Six months ago, M. Bonhomme saw me in a minor theatre, where I had made a hit in a trifling part, and he immediately paid me strenuous court. He had none of the parts which would please me, and I had rebuffed addresses much more captivating. He soon became wildly enamoured of me—so much so as to offer me his name, which did not tempt me; but I had promised my mother to marry. The only chance I had before was from theatrical professionals, whom I did not desire.'

'And thereupon you decided——'

'To accept the generous proposal of the honest fellow. You have seen him, and he may appear ridiculous to you. I refused him at first, and held out a long time. He was stubborn, despite all I could say to him to turn him from his determination and the wrath of his father, who wholly opposed the marriage. Finally I let myself be won over by so much perseverance, and I sacrificed myself not to break the vow I made to my mother. She had suffered so much from her irregular position that her dream was to see me wedded. This delight was not hers, but from high heaven where she dwells she must have blessed me when I consented to become Joseph Bonhomme's wife. I had some merit in resigning myself to that, for it pained me dreadfully to enter into a family which did not wish for me. Joseph had to employ the forms of law towards his father, who would yield only to force and constraint. I should have been overwhelmed with humiliations, which I might not have been able to bear. My poverty, my birth, and my fleeting appearance in the theatre would have been thrown up at me. You have seen how I was treated by his father, who is certainly a respectable man in all the acceptation of the term; but he loves money, and never loved anything else. Judge what I should have suffered in his house after becoming his son's wife!'

'Your husband would have protected you.'

'He would not have dared do it. He trembled before his father, and he must have been deeply smitten by me to act so strongly as to use the law against him. His father gave way only because Joseph was indispensable at the works, and he feared he would set up in business on his own account. He did all he could to keep him away from me. He had anonymous letters written to him, accusing me of having lovers——'

'How shameful!'

'In short, he did give in; but if you only knew what conditions he imposed! I had to engage myself to keep the books of the works in order to save him a clerk's salary. I was married without any settlement, and I had to renounce in writing all my marital claims on my husband's property, so that M. Bonhomme, sen., in case of his son's death, could turn me out into the street penniless, without any means. He has not failed to do it, for, you see, he has driven me away.'

'And did you consent to all this?'

'I have told you why. I vowed to my dying mother to become a married woman, and I meant to fulfil that vow. If I had refused Joseph, I would never have found another man to consent to wed me.'

'You would have found a better one than he from whom you are widowed,' said the captain, without any emphasis.

His real thought was that Thérèse Tercier's position was not of the kind naturally ending in wedlock, and that he had been premature in proposing so quickly to succeed M. Joseph Bonhomme.

Although a man may have lived abroad in heathendom, he still has prejudices when born and bred in the class wherein Octave de Parentis had lived before going to serve his country in the Antipodes, and none but those madly in love marry a French actress, exceptions allowed; particularly an actress of no celebrity. On her own avowal, Thérèse had never played but in petty playhouses.

Nevertheless, the captain felt he was captivated, and would not have the courage to halt here.

The strangeness of the meeting in the Zoological Gardens had some share in this fervour or 'goneness,' as Savinien de Coulibœuf would say in his special slang. In the theatre the captain would not perhaps have noticed Thérèse, but under the bridal garland she had turned his head. The explanation had not chilled him, but it set him musing, and he was puzzled how to reconcile matters. Reason advised him to stop, whilst passion urged him onward. In such cases reason seldom carries the day.

'You are mistaken, monsieur,' went on the bereaved one; 'I shall find no such a match, and I am not going to look for one. You are about to say politely that I have found one, since you propose, but I cannot believe you. You are rich, of high family, and an officer in the army. Without lowering yourself you cannot marry a nameless girl who has no resource but the stage, for, I repeat it, I am determined to go on the stage again. Oh!' she continued, as he held his peace, 'I do not blind myself upon the consequences of the resolution I take. I shall have to go through hard tests, and choose between dishonour and poverty; but my choice is made upon poverty, which I will bear—unless, by some piece of impossible good fortune, I rise as a great artiste. If I become a star I then will have satisfied myself, and yet I do not hope so much. Stars do not shine in a thick sky, and I have the clouds of death upon my soul. I expect to suffer, and I am resigned to that; but I shall struggle as long as I have the power.'

'A friend can help to support you in the career in which you venture,' said Octave softly. 'Will you have me as that friend?'

'I would like it, but it is impossible, you must know. I do not believe in friendship between a man and a woman; and you do not, any more than I. It is mutual deception—unless it be an incline up towards a more tender feeling. A woman on the stage cannot have friends—they are worshippers or nothing.'

'Then I am to see you no more?'

'I did not say that! I have no right to tell you so after what I have done—accepting your escort and asking you in here. I should be very ungrateful if I ever forgot how you interested yourself in me, and took me under your guard when everybody turned aloof. We shall meet again, if you require it.'

'I do not require it, but I entreat it.'

'That amounts to the same thing, since I cannot refuse you anything you ask,' said Thérèse, sadly smiling. 'But I must explain to you at present why I asked you in—it is because I expect a service which you alone can do me. I have no lady friends now; I never had any real ones, for women in theatres are all jealous of one another; and still less have I gentlemen friends. Those who paid me their addresses, and still would do so, were not friends. I repelled them all, and I cannot, do not wish to apply to them. Besides, if I return to the boards, as I am resolved upon, I am not going to tell my story to anybody. I shall let manager and company conclude I have stage fever again, and have revoked my intention after trying to live off the stage. They can believe as much as they like.'

'I am afraid the newspapers will inform them of the very things you wish to keep back. They will certainly make much of the event in the Jardin d'Acclimatation.'

'Of the event, true; but I hope I shall not be mentioned. Besides, it matters little to me what they say, as I have made up my mind to break forever with the family to which I was just about joined. I shall recall the marriage as a bad dream, and I am sure that the kinsfolk of my husband for a day will quickly forget me. His father will esteem himself only too lucky in being rid of me; and it is to spare myself the heart-breaking pain of seeing him again that I have recourse to you.'

'What can I do for you?' asked the captain, unable to guess what she was aiming at.

'This is the point. Although I married without a dowry or settlement, my mother had invested for me in an assurance company all her savings during twenty years. I have fifteen hundred francs a year; little, yet enough to allow my living without being under obligations to anyone.'

The captain could not help smiling, but Thérèse paid no heed, and continued imperturbably:

'I have lived on less, and privations do not frighten me. My mother also left me the room of furniture which you see, which I was going to sell; but now I shall keep it. But I shall not keep presents received from my unfortunate husband; they shall go to his father.'

'Oh, you look to me to return them?'

'Yes, monsieur. Was I wrong to do so? are you going to refuse the task?'

'No, not if you are bent upon it; but I do think you would do better by choosing another agent.'

'Why?' the young woman timidly inquired.

'Why—because such a step on my part will give grounds for awkward suppositions. It is only an hour ago since I spoke to you for the first time, and we had barely exchanged a few words before the catastrophe befell. How can I explain to the grief-stricken father that you selected me to carry out so delicate an errand—a man of whom he has only had a glimpse?'

'He'll ask no explanations. I know the man. If he does, you need only speak the truth. It will not amaze him, as he saw us depart in company. I did not hide myself. The fact will not distress him—no, for, as I repeat, he will rejoice at not being troubled any more by me.'

Octave de Parentis could not very clearly make out this unexpected suggestion, or an answer to this 'Mourning Bride' so readily consoled. Was she sincere in unfolding the programme of the existence she meant to lead hereafter? Was she truthful in relating the short, barren story of her singular union? Whatever questions he put to himself could not be solved, from his not sufficiently well understanding Thérèse Tercier. Yet he did in some degree see into this spirit tempered by misfortune, and he felt that this orphan, cruelly tried from infancy, ought not to be judged like one on whom everything in life had smiled. He reasoned that at least she had all the merit of openness in not feigning hypocritical grief and in not dissimulating her plans. A cunning coquette, with views upon the handsome officer met by chance, would have acted otherwise to ensnare him. Such a one would have played the tearful maiden, and, above all, would have taken good heed about announcing that she was going to become a player of small parts, as before the marriage which turned out so sadly. Such petty performers are not actresses.

Parentis was strongly tempted to believe that she spoke in good faith, even when she asserted she had married Joseph Bonhomme merely to keep a pledge to her mother. But Coulibœuf would have considered his cousin a great simpleton.

Parentis began also to be much less astonished that Thérèse's first thought should be to restore the courtship presents, for the existence led by her sufficiently well explained her medley of highflown sentiments and practical reflections. She was born chivalric, and, even more, romantic; it was poverty taught her not to ignore the vulgar necessities of life. What the captain had seen and heard after the lamentable occurrence in the Jardin d'Acclimatation, led him to credit that Thérèse had justly valued the bronze manufacturer of the Rue des Trois Bornes. This sordid fellow was a profound egotist, as well as a ferocious miser, one of those odious beings who have a roll of bank-notes instead of heart, inaccessible to ideal conceits and incapable of understanding a generous impulse.

'Can I depend on you?' asked the young woman, a little perturbed by the silence he preserved.

'I will do what you wish,' rejoined he in the end; 'but I persist in thinking it will be better to send them by a commissionnaire.'

'Oh, they are not going to load you heavily—only this watch, bracelet, keeper—these earrings—all the jewels which I received are here; they were only accepted unwillingly, for it seemed to me I was selling myself. Out of my own money I paid for my wedding garments, and I——'

Thérèse's speech was cut short by a violent peal of the doorbell. Assuredly this was totally unexpected at the door of rooms quitted that morning, not to be tenanted that night. Nobody was waiting there for her. The doorkeeper had not seen her come in.

Who, then, had divined that she had gone back to her own lodgings, instead of to the conjugal domicile? Not knowing what to think or, as was more essential, what to do, Parentis questioned her with a look.

'Stay, I entreat,' said she, without any emotion, 'I have no secrets from you. Step in here,' she added, as he appeared but partially satisfied by the request, and she drew up a blue rep door-hanging which masked another room door. 'You will not be seen and you can hear everything, which is precisely what I wish.'

He obeyed without reply, it being no moment to press for explanation, for the bell was pulled again, and more roughly than before, and that ring was followed by another. The caller was growing impatient, and must exercise some authority over the lady, for he rang like a master. A suspicion crossed the captain's brain. Who thus heralded himself? A jilted swain who came here to raise a disturbance because he had been thrown over? Or a gallant so badly informed on matters as they stood, that he was unaware his flame had blazed with another on the altar, and who called at the usual hour for her receiving him? The slightest incident would have been ample to shake Parentis's trust, and the rash judgment he hastened to form, showed to what a degree he was enthralled. Only the jealous are so suspicious, and none are jealous who are not deeply in love.

Thérèse did not leave him long in uncertainty. She went to open the door, and faced her father-in-law, who brutally thrust her aside, and stamped in without removing his hat, shouting:

'He is dead! you have killed him!'

'You said that before, and you drove me away,' she responded coldly. 'What is your business here?'

'To forbid your ever setting a foot under my roof.'

'You know very well that I should never go there. You must have something else to say to me.'

'I want to notify you, that if you dare show yourself at the funeral——'

'Widows do not go to the funerals of their husbands. It was not to say this that you come.'

'I forbid you to bear my son's name——'

'You could not believe I would bear it, after his death. Your visit has another aim.'

'Ay—to curse you, to tell you that you are but a stranger to me henceforth.'

'Make a frank confession, will you, that you have come to ask back any jewellery your son gave me? I was going to send them to you. Take them yourself,' added Thérèse, taking out her earrings, and removing her watch and bracelet, which she dropped on the mantelboard beside her orange-flower wreath. 'And here is my wedding-ring,' she concluded, plucking that off her finger. 'Nothing remains me of your hapless son; but still you cannot prevent me praying for him.'

M. Bonhomme hesitated an instant, in shame, but this scruple did not last long. He took the jewels and pocketed them, grumbling:

'I would have left you them had you been worthy to wear them, but I know now what to think of you. You went away with your paramour, to whom you had given an assignation in the Jardin d'Acclimatation. You were seen getting into a carriage with him, even whilst your husband was dying. It may even be that this fellow hired that snake-performer to have my son stung to death. A murderer and a strolling player are fit accomplices.'

'You scoundrel!' roared the captain, leaping suddenly into the room.

'A trap!' faltered the mean old man. 'I—I might have suspected it.'

He was already making for the door, when Parentis caught him by the collar, and shook him so roughly that he bellowed for help.

'Go down on your knees, you rascal!' thundered the officer, beyond himself; 'down on your knees to this noble woman whom you have insulted!'

He forced him down at her feet.

'M—m—mercy! Don't hurt me,' howled the cowardly miser; 'I ask your pardon. It was grief at the loss of my son made me forget myself.'

'Your son? You only regret him because he helped you earn money. If you had loved him you would not have left his body to go and insult his relict and snatch away her marriage presents.'

The captain had not let go of this disgraceful father, and his grip was firm; he lifted him to his feet, and dragged him away like a feather to the door, where he flung him out.

'You shall hear from me again, both of you,' shouted old Bonhomme, tumbling downstairs, more quickly than he liked to move.

The captain shut the door and returned to Thérèse, who had allowed this to be done without feigning pity she could not feel.

'It is you, now, who must pardon me,' said he; 'overlook my letting anger sway me, and having made you look on at so painful a scene. Forgive me, too, for having doubted you. I had difficulty in believing so much baseness could reside in that man; and when he rang——'

'You thought it was some gallant coming to see me. I do not bear you any ill-will. In my position I must look forward to being suspected; and

I fear nothing, because I have nothing to blame myself for. There is only one thing I deplore—it is your having shown yourself. He knows who you are, and he will try to injure you.'

'I defy him. I am above his attacks. My fear of that old villain is merely because of you.'

'I do not fear him. Now that he has gratified his greed, he will leave me in peace.'

'I hope he will; but if he does interfere with you I trust you will let me defend you.'

'I will defend myself, single-handed, well enough; but still your sympathy is precious to me, and I accept your proffered help—I mean, conditionally upon M. Bonhomme accusing me of having brought about the death of his son. Then I shall call in your testimony. But, as I have already stated my intention, I intend remaining my own mistress.'

'I clearly understand it, and I repeat what I have already said—that I love you. But that's no reason for your loving me; still, do authorize me to endeavour to induce you to love me, on any conditions, however hard, to which I submit beforehand.'

'Even though I exacted from you the promise not to see me any more?' asked the other wickedly.

'Nay, for that's a promise I could not keep, being beyond my power. Besides, how could I expect to please you if I did not see you?'

'Then you ask me to put you on probation?'

'I did not like to use the term, but I entreat you not to mistake the meaning I attach to it. I know your value now, and I esteem you too highly to try to become less than your life-partner. I am independent, for I have no near kin, and I have to account to nobody for my actions.'

'To nobody but your country. You are an officer in the army, and you have not the right to break your career by resigning your commission.'

'Certainly not; but I am free to marry you while remaining in the service—unless you have a repugnance to becoming a soldier's wife.'

'I should be proud of that! But no less would content me.'

'Well, then, I am home on six months' leave. If you consent to put me to the test, and I say at the end of six months, "Will you be mine?" will you follow me to Tonkin, whither I must return? Will you at length believe I love you fondly?'

'Perhaps,' murmured Thérèse, deeply affected.

'That's ample answer,' said the captain merrily. 'When am I to see you again?'

'I—I hardly know,' faltered the young woman. 'Heaven only knows what would be thought of me were I to receive you here. Besides, I am going back upon the stage, which I have not concealed from you. I must busy myself in finding an engagement, and, anyway, I shall not keep on with these rooms, which remind me of sad things. So I must look elsewhere.'

'Ah!' said Parentis bitterly, 'if you were in a mind to love me you would not speak in this strain! What matter the sayings of the scandalmongers? What matter your doings, so long as you do not forbid my seeing you? If I had to give you up I should not wait for my leave to expire ere joining my regiment, and throwing away my life in action.'

'No, no! don't do that,' ejaculated Thérèse quickly.

'Then promise me——'

'I promise you to write daily until we can see one another without inconvenience. If I get an engagement, as I hope, nothing will prevent my receiving you. I can even invite you to the theatre where I am playing. Of all the tests you offer to undergo, that will be the most painful, for you will be pained if I am hissed, and still more if the gentlemen of your degree applaud me.'

'It will be the most conclusive test, also, for you will no longer doubt my love if I can bear it.'

'Then you accept my conditions?'

'Since you force me to do so.'

'Very well, I have faith in you,' proceeded the young woman, holding out her hand to the captain, who kissed it respectfully.

'I am staying at the Grand Hotel,' said he gravely, 'where I await your commands.'

He had hit upon the most seemly tone in which to give his address without Thérèse being tempted to feel vexation. Now she was as sure of him as he of her, and their life was going to enter into a fresh phase.

But they were not at the end of their troubles.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CHIT-CHAT OF THE CLUB.

CLUB dinners are no dearer than restaurant ones and they are more bounteous. Are they any better? Here we have a hotly-debated question; but what is not in doubt is its being unpleasant to dine in a numerous company, unless the diner can choose his neighbours. This is not the case in clubs, where, unless you and your party book reserved places, you are unaware until seated whether or no your companion will not be a bore. Hence 'the old hands' in Parisian life prefer to dine with known friends in some select nook in a fashionable restaurant. But the dinner in common is a precious resource for many club members, notably those temporarily up to town, and also the wise men who like to digest an excellent meal in luxurious easy-chairs, without having to throw money away.

Accustomed to all kinds of privations by his campaign in Tonkin, Octave de Parentis was not dainty in his tastes; and he did not care about saving either. He always was a bit of a spendthrift, and as he did not scatter a quarter of his income in camp, nothing prevented him living freely during his half-year's leave, the first he had taken in five years. Still, having so recently arrived, he had not settled down in the capital.

In the month of September, his friends of old were touring or hunting, and, moreover, he found himself nowhere in the fast circle where he had once been everywhere at home. This fast circle included the ladies, of course, whose assemblage much resembled the Grande Armée of the First Empire. There was the Old Guard which never changed, and the Young Guard whose ranks were incessantly filled up.

Parentis knew the former only too well, and was not of a heart to renew acquaintance with the worn-out veterans.

Hence it resulted that, since his return, he passed his time at the club where he had been received in his youth in memory of his father, one of its founders and most assiduous members. It was not the desire to meet his cousin Savinien which attracted him, but his liking to find old friends of his father, and he gladly dined here when not at the Café Anglais with some brother officer.

He went thither straightway after reluctantly quitting the young widow who now occupied his whole mind, and not to play whist or billiards, or even to chat over the day's doings with the gathering between five and seven, scanty at this season. He might have gone to his rooms in the Grand Hotel, wishful as he was to isolate himself to muse in peace over the singular events which had revolutionized his life; but he had considered it better to nurse his hopes and remembrances at the club.

On arriving, he went and leaned over the long balcony which overlooks the boulevard, but without paying any attention to the beauties of dubious virtue who came by the kerb in their victorias from the Bois de Boulogne. Still before his eyes beamed the proud, winning countenance of Thérèse Tercier, and as the needle is true to the unseen Pole (if the simile is not rather obsolete), he mechanically gazed eastward towards the Bastille, as if he could see the windows of her floor on the Boulevard Beaumarchais.

What was the widow doing, whom old Bonhomme had so abused? Mayhap donning her mourning robe after casting the bridal attire. Her hateful father-in-law, who forbade her bearing his son's name, had not done so as regarded her wearing weeds; and she had proper feeling enough to wear them, anyway.

At present the captain comprehended this truly womanly character, full of contrasts, and the singularities which shocked him a little at the first appeared quite natural. With clear calmness he judged her conduct, and did not hesitate to absolve her, since he knew the worthlessness of the family she had entered. She would have remained faithful to the husband whom she did not love; her bewailing him could not be exacted. And Parentis believed in the oath made by Thérèse to her dying mother, and in the reproachlessness of her behaviour whilst she was in the playhouse. Faith springs up readily in the heart of a soldier who risks his life daily, and really brave souls are rarely sceptical.

Octave left the future of her budding love to that Providence which had preserved him from Chinese bullets and the plague arising from the poisonous Tonkinese rivers. He was sincere in proposing marriage to Thérèse, but he did not hide from himself that events might be stronger than his will. God's will be done, he said; but he intended as well to put the good old maxim into practice of 'Heaven helps those who help themselves.'

It fretted him till he could commence the probation imposed on him by his beloved, and he impatiently awaited the letter she had agreed to write. As soon as he received it, he meant to set to work to decide her to shorten the test. He also hoped that old Bonhomme would furnish him with the chance to defend the young widow, and that she would be duly grateful for his protecting her against the malevolent old fellow. All he dreaded was an urgent War-Office order forcing him to embark before the expiration of his leave to resume command of his company, in case of a sudden revolt of the Tonkinese. There would be no alternative, then, but to give up Thérèse, for an officer does not send in his resignation when recalled to march against the foe.

But the captain did not foresee misfortunes so nearly, and their eventuality much less worried him than the dangers to which Thérèse exposed herself by returning to the stage. In what theatre was she going to appear? She had neglected to tell him whither she would turn, and he had not liked to ask her. He did not even know her ‘line of business,’ to be technical. Was she a vocalist, or simply fit for speaking parts? Did she merely have a few lines? What was the theatre where she hoped to enter? Assuredly not the Français or the Opéra.

In Paris, the paradise of ‘extra-ladies,’ and those showy girls who ‘walk on’ merely, there are few real theatres; but there are many *boui-bouis*—‘dustholes,’ as these lesser amusement halls are styled, where talent is totally superfluous. Beauty suffices for making a woman known to the set of the class to which Savinien de Coulibœuf belonged.

The captain heartily hoped that Thérèse had no ambition for such successes of impure alloy, but rather for becoming an artiste in the true acceptance of the word; yet he was not without disquietude upon the outcome of this essay, and hoped it would be of no great duration, although he had made up his mind to see his intended wife reappear. He might have added that such a marriage as he contemplated would put him in a thorny situation, as neither his superior nor even his brother officers would approve of his marrying an actress. The captain feared nothing, a mental disposition which, whilst it had mightily served him in the military career, almost surely prepared some rebuff for him in civil life.

A man with a light heart, who does not glance behind him, can carry an entrenchment ; but boldness alone is not enough when the pupils of the Parisian School for Scandal have to be silenced.

Octave de Parentis, who had lived in this circle, knew that prejudices rule, and that it would cost him dearly to run counter to received opinions. But what mattered this to him ? He was still at the early period of passionate love when everything looks lovely, and no obstacles are perceived. His overheated imagination again presented the various episodes of that stroll in the Bois de Boulogne, which had changed the course of his life's stream: the meeting with the wedding-train, the abrupt declaration of love, and the tragical concluding occurrences.

Again he beheld the swart Singalese, the cobra's hideous head, the unhappy husband sinking back into the arms of his guests, and the brave Bask-in-the-Sun rushing to pommel the snake-charmer. Again, too, he acknowledged that the Mussulmans are not far wrong in believing in the inevitable power of Fate.

'Every bullet has its billet,' said 'Jacques the Fatalist.'

The captain had read Diderot, and he had often in war-times found occasion to verify Jacques' being right.

'It was written,' reasoned the captain, 'that I should go to the Jardin d'Acclimatation this day. If I had not gone till the morrow, or if I had yielded to that ass Savinien who wanted to take me away to the pigeon-shooting match, I would never have met Thérèse, never known she existed, in fact ; and her husband would not be dead, as he would not have entered the reserved place. *Ergo*, it is written that Thérèse is to be my wife.'

The premises of this fine piece of logic were exact—more so than the conclusion; but it pleased Octave because it harmonized with his dearest desire. He was so long cherishing these fancies that night surprised him on the balcony, closing in early, as it does in September.

He had booked a place at the grand table, and a footman came to warn him that dinner was on the board. All of a sudden he discovered he was hungry ; nothing does so sharply set a man's appetite as deep emotion, and he had gone through all kinds of it. So he hastened to the salon, which he had to cross to enter the dining-room, and there spied Savinien finishing a game of *piquet* with a Russian : the former must have lost, for he was as red as a boiled crab, and his eyes were starting out of his head like a lobster's. The captain could have dispensed with his company at table, for he foresaw that Savinien would assail him with questions to which he did not care to answer ; but he did not succeed in avoiding him.

'Keep me a place next yours,' called out his burdensome kinsman.

Without reply the captain passed on to go and seat himself at the end of the long table, where the dozen regular places were not occupied ; there were many gaps, in fact, for the summer had emptied the house, and there is never a number of diners when the season for travelling, yachting, and watering-places is at its height.

Parentis was far from complaining at this, for he only wanted loneliness, and he took care to place himself so as to have nobody actually at his elbow.

The seven or eight diners around him were not friends of his, but those he only knew by name and sight, not enough to be obliged to enter into conversation with them. Individual independence is practised in all club-houses, and it is settled that nobody is to be annoyed. If put in a fit form, a member may say anything he likes; but there is also the right to be silent—and that is the one our captain intended to exercise.

There were young men here belonging to the shepherd's-crook-cane and toothpick brigade, and two or three of a sterner kind: viz., a gentleman live-stock breeder passing through town, a retired general, and an old subscriber to the opera whom nothing could keep away from the ballet green-room, even when the opera-house was shut in the hot weather. The juveniles prated about women, gaming, and shooting; the cattle-raiser orated upon horses to the old opera-goer, who was only interested in dancers' shape and limbs, and barely replied; and the general, as usual, growled at the wines and the cookery. Nothing of all this beguiled Parentis, who did not listen, but ate away with a glorious appetite.

They were at the end of the first course when in came Couliboeuf to occupy one of the chairs kept free beside his cousin, who could not very decently prevent his taking it. Couliboeuf, for his part, knew everybody, and only wanted to babble. He was the butt of the club, the youngsters finding sport in 'sticking him up' to shy their wit at, and even the old sinners sometimes had to laugh at the stupid things he uttered with imperturbable gravity. On this occasion he was hailed with a shower of jests and sallies.

'Where are you fresh from, Couliboeuf?'

'Was it the little countess detained you so long?'

'My good old Couliboeuf, you are red as fire. Have you been indulging too much?'

'You are getting stout, Couliboeuf.'

'On the contrary, I have just lost five hundred *pounds*,' returned Savinien, without wincing.

'How's that? Has the Russ won as much as that off you?'

'A thousand points at Rubicon, ten francs a point—yes, my dear boy. This Muscovite is the luckiest beggar ever I saw. I hope to get even with him this evening after leaving the table, but I could not induce him to dine here. He asserts he has been inviting the three prettiest women in town to a banquet on the terrace at the Ambassadeurs' Music-hall, but I call it an excuse not to give me my revenge.'

'He might at least have let you in as one of the party.'

'I would not have accepted the offer. I am in a beastly humour, after passing such a disgusting day. Parentis dragged me all over the Jardin d'Acclimatation, and that's perfectly sickening.'

'Oh yes, the Singalese are there. I don't see that they are lively at all.'

'Things grew lively enough before all was over, though ! let me tell you there was a dozen wedding-parties about, and one of the Benedicts was stung by a serpent.'

'He seems less in luck than your Russian antagonist. Is he dead from it ?'

'Upon my word, I do not know. I did not have any yearning to be bitten myself, and I cut it. All I know is he pulled an awfully ugly face. But my cousin stayed behind, and he will tell us if the poor devil escaped.'

Brought forward to his high discontent, the captain could not elude replying, but it was a laconic reply.

'He did not outlive it ten minutes,' he said.

'Whew ! it's horrid rough to die in the Park of Paris by the bite of a poisonous snake !' remarked one of the youthful Brummells who found fun in drawing out Savinien.

'A very common thing in Mexico,' said the general.

'It ought to be prohibited in France,' said Coulbœuf, laughing at his own wit. 'But you are not telling us, Octave, what you have done with the widow.'

'I—nothing!' growled the captain, devoting Savinien to the hottest spot in the nether world.

'What! did you drop her, then and there? you missed a capital chance of seeing her home. She was worth the trouble—a titbit for a king! Yet you were awfully gone on her; I can't understand you letting her slide. So you do not know what's become of her?'

Parentis shook his head.

'Can the Singalese have run away with her who crammed her with flummery? Now, then, don't you wax angry, or I shall believe you are sweet on her with the best intentions.'

'Is she very good-looking?' queried the opera-goer.

'Adorable, my dear baron; a black-eyed blonde—with a waist you could span with both hands, a skin like satin, splendid shoulders, and such tootsies! you never saw the match on the boards of the National Academy of Music. Only to think that this beauty married a commonplace fellow! However, she's a widow now, and the lucky dog who hunts her out of her form may boast of catching a marvel.'

The old opera-goer's mouth watered, for he plainly licked his lips, to the great joy of the new generation, who always mocked at this superannuated Don Juan. Parentis did not laugh, though; he was on hot coals, and with very good reason. His insupportable cousin's remarks fell like a dash of cold water upon his enthusiasm, and he felt greatly inclined to take Couliboeuf by the throat to prevent him marring his ideal by silly jokes. By his mien, the rattlebrain did not doubt there was a snake in the grass, and, as he was not bellicose, he abstained from proceeding lest he should cause a 'bother.' But it was decreed that our officer should not get off so easily.

Table-chat has awkward issues, and the most inoffensive subject may engender a serious quarrel. Spurred by Savinien's description, one of the new-comers suddenly broke in :

'Talking of the Café-Concert des Ambassadeurs, and of blondes with two lovely black eyes, who among you gentlemen can give me news about a girl answering to that description who sang at this open-air concert last year?'

'By Jove, I remember her!' said another of his kind. 'She was as pretty as a butterfly, and beat all the gang at singing sentimental ballads.'

'My dear boy, let me tell you that I have been three times to this same concert, to see nobody else, and I lost my money: she does not come now.'

'Of course not! She has found a friend. On those boards, beauties are rare, and they never cling long. You have "missed your train," old child! You ought to have plied your suit last year, when you would have pulled off the event.'

'Why, I did! I sent I can't say how many bouquets, and I was "out" for the cost—to say nothing of the ridicule I was covered with. How my chums and "little darling pets" chaffed me! They called me the "Spoony Viscount"—ha, ha!'

'You did not go to work properly. If you had sent her brilliants instead of flowers, the game would have come off quickly——'

'That's likely; but her admirers made me disgusted with her. They came there every night—a gang of low fellows—no style about them whatever! —who clapped her like hired applauders, and called her on after every verse. There was one who went into fits when she sang a single note; and the flower-seller told me that he was her chosen man. So the last word was spoken that bound me to her, and I never went there again; not liking to run counter to a fellow who looked to be a factory overseer or captain of a gang of navvies, don't you see?'

The captain had idly listened to this dialogue between two used-up lady-killers who were trying to outbrag one another, far from suspecting that it would end in interesting him.

'So you say she did not reappear this year?' resumed the viscount's interlocutor.

'No; and nobody could tell me what had become of her. I dare say she has gone on the acting-stage, for she had a delightful voice, and she knew how to make use of it.'

'Then we shall find her again this winter at the Nouveautés or the Bouffes. What was the name she went under?'

'Let me see: Amanda? Florina?—hem!—something of that sort, ending in *a*, anyway. Stop!—I have it. Teresa!'

'That's it! I myself remember now, and that she did not at all resemble her great coarse namesake of the music-halls of old.'

'So do I remember!' exclaimed Coulibœuf; 'and I can tell you what's become of her.'

'Speak out, old man. You will please me awfully, for my craze is not wholly cured.'

'I knew I had seen her somewhere before,' muttered Coulibœuf to himself. 'I say, dear old Octave,' he said aloud to his cousin, 'we're talking about *your* blonde—the bride of the Jardin d'Acclimatation adventure.'

CHAPTER V.

THE CHALLENGE.

'EH, what?' asked the captain, like a man suddenly awakened.

That was about his condition, too, for he was musing on his love, and heard without comprehension the banter of the three or four interchangers of small talk.

'I was saying, old fellow,' went on Savinien, 'that the pretty girl who has captured you so fully, sang at the Ambassadeurs' Café Concert last year.'

'Nonsense!'

'I am sure of it. She must have an enormous "cheek," to marry under the orange-blossoms. Ask Chavigny, who was "after her" and informed himself about her. If he did not succeed, it was because she had at least one more fortunate—probably several, whilst she was about it. That's one of them she married this morning.'

'What was this husband like?' inquired the Vicomte de Chavigny.

'A tall, strapping fellow, broad-shouldered, with an unkempt beard, a short brush of hair, and hands as big as shoulders of mutton,' responded Couliboeuf.

'The very same who came to applaud her last year. He did have a pair of cymbals!—just the things to get him a livelihood as *chef-de-claque* in any playhouse.'

'There!' cried out Coulibœuf, 'what did I tell you? He was living maritally with her, and, when we met him around the Singalese, he had regularized the position. Rather a failure, the good young man's commendable behaviour, for he died, d'ye see! And yet it was lucky for him, since the blonde turned your head. That lout confiscated her, and now she has returned into the market.'

The captain did not speak; but it was plain he suffered torture.

'Will you lay me twenty-five louis that her stage name is not Teresa?' said Coulibœuf.

As Teresa in Italian is Thérèse in French, the captain began to fear that his undesirable cousin had guessed aright, but he took care not to acknowledge it. He would willingly have boxed the ears of these blockheads who seemed bound to rend away his illusions.

'Ask her when next you see her,' continued Coulibœuf; 'for you are going to see her again—I do not suppose you let the chance slip to get her address.'

'If I knew where our widow dwells,' took up M. de Chavigny, laughing, 'I should gladly pay her a visit. She ought to be easily consolable.'

'Don't put yourself out to call on her, dear boy. Now she is free, she will come out as a singer again in some café concert—the Ambassadeurs', for instance, once more, although the season is well out. She will have a genuine success there; and I am sure we can make up for lost time.'

'I will go out there one of these evenings,' said the viscount.

'So will I! The little sweet-tart did not displease me, either. The thing will be to come in first, for she will be much run after. The story of her widowhood will make her town's-talk. Tell me, Octave, are you going to enter for this steeplechase?'

'I do not know what you mean,' bluntly replied the captain.

'Oh, don't you pretend to be so innocent! You fired up so hotly that I could not manage to cool you down; but now you have been shown that the bride is a humbug, and you will be a great fool if you do not have some fun in your home-leave.'

'They are fools who, like you, abuse women whom they do not know.'

'The devil! you are hard on me,' said Savinien banteringly. 'However, between kinsmen, sharp words do not count.'

'Kinship has nothing to do with this case. I speak for society at large, and I repeat that it is stupid to chatter at random when a lady's reputation is concerned.'

'Halloa! getting excited again, eh? Get away with you, Tonkinese that you have become!'

'Be it so! I do come from Tonkin, where fighting goes on, mark you! and where men do not waste their time slandering the defenceless.'

'Plague on it! it strikes me you are undertaking the defence.'

'Yes, I do; and I should have little heart to let her be attacked without imposing silence on her defamers. I am not accustomed to your Parisian ways——'

'That's so, you are *not* "in the swim."'

'I am a soldier, do you hear? and I think like one—so much the differently from you who think—if it can be called thinking—like a scent-bottle!'

'Gentlemen,' uttered the general, 'M. de Parentis is right. Respect the sex under any circumstances.'

'Even when they do not deserve it?' ironically queried the viscount.

'What a lovely thing youth is!' hissed the old opera-frequenter. 'It still preserves illusions.'

'I beg your pardon,' struck in Coulibœuf, 'I haven't any, and I believe I never had any. And Chavigny is in the same boat.'

'I pity those who resemble you, and I very little esteem them.'

This was spoken in such a tone that everybody was hushed. The sharp remark spread a chill; Coulibœuf, who had caused it, hung his head. The dandies sulked, and the viscount lost colour.

'My dear Parentis,' observed the general, 'you are going a little too far. I also am a soldier, and I do not like to hear women decried. But I assure you that these gentlemen had no intention to offend you, being ignorant that you were acquainted with this—this person.'

'Allow me, general. It is of little consequence whether I know the lady or not. I do not admit that coarse joking is meet on an event which does not lend itself to merriment.'

'It's not our fault that this lubberly husband got bitten,' grumbled Coulibœuf, who began to look up on finding he had backers.

'I particularly recommend you to be quiet!'

'Gentlemen, gentlemen!' cried the old opera-goer, who did not like wrangles, 'a little calmness, please. Let us dine in peace.'

The captain did not appear so disposed. He was no longer self-possessed, but glared on the others as if seeking any one of them to pick up the gauntlet flung down to them collectively, however untimely. He was not usually so sensitive, but the chatter had wounded him to the heart, the more keenly from his not being in the position to prove their falsehood. It might be true that Thérèse Tercier had sung at the Ambassadeurs' before her marriage, and that M. Joseph Bonhomme had been her favourite gallant, but the captain could not tolerate it being spoken before him. This was truly a proof that he loved her to distraction, for his claim was exorbitant, particularly in a club where members spoke freely. But the more deeply he felt in the wrong, the farther he was bent upon going, and his principal spite was against the Viscount de Chavigny, who had already paid his addresses to the vocalist and boasted of going to succeed next time. Notwithstanding his air of a perfect 'masher,' the nobleman was no fool or poltroon, and the captain gave him a handsome part in provoking him without a motive. All M. de Chavigny had to do to keep this best position was to remain as moderate as his adversary showed himself violent.

Hence he affected to smile in saying:

'Really, this is much ado about nothing—the virtue of an open-air singer—ha, ha! I would not have doubted it aloud, if I could have guessed the doubt would have offended anybody. M. de Parentis is right: women must not be lightly spoken of, even the lightest!'

'Monsieur,' broke in the officer drily, 'your mode of acknowledging your misconduct aggravates in lieu of lessening it. You will do well to change the manner.'

'Do you set up to give me a lesson?' queried the viscount, drawing himself up.

'Take it as you please.'

'It pleases me to regard your words as an insult. My friends will call on you in the morning, monsieur.'

'I shall expect them, and I trust we shall settle the matter immediately.'

'That wish is mine, and, never doubt it, it will be realized. Now, gentlemen,' added M. de Chavigny, with an off-hand air, 'it seems to me that the clôture is applied to this interruption, as they say in the House.'

'Ay, ay,' chorussed the other diners, comprising the live-stock breeder and the opera habitué, essentially pacific folk.

The general abstained from any manifestation, thinking that the French army, as represented by Octave de Parentis, had not the advantage in this verbal duel, and he was not satisfied. The diversion called for by the viscount did not follow, albeit everybody strove to find another subject of conversation without success. The dinner had become a funereal banquet, and all were ill at ease. The steward and waiting footmen put on a suitable countenance; sharp altercations were rare in the club, particularly at table, and these men had never had such a sensation.

Naturally enough, it was Coulibœuf who broke this embarrassing silence; and as he would never let a chance go by without making a blunder, he said:

'I have a good mind to go to the Ambassadeurs' to-night, if only to see if my Russian was not boasting when he talked of dining there. If I do discover him there, I am not going to be shaken off before I have my revenge.'

'Beware, lest revenge costs you dear!' said the viscount, whose vanity bound him to appear lively in spirit.

The captain was already frowning when a footman, out of the hall, approached him and offered a visiting-card on a silver salver.

'Very well; I shall come,' said Parentis, after reading the name.

The others exchanged a glance and a smile, each with his neighbour—the same thought striking all.

'Nothing should disturb an honest man at dinner,' runs the line of a gastronomical poet, and this sage principle is rigidly observed in clubs. No messages are taken in during meals, so that the visitor must have strongly urged for the servant to break orders, and it had to be of vital moment for the captain to leave the board before the dessert.

'It's his lady-love,' thought the rest.

Hence they considered this simple soldier more and more ridiculous for breaking lances on behalf of a music-hall singer, and getting up in the middle of dinner to go and welcome his flame as a recruit leaves his mess to embrace his lass at the barracks door; but nobody said a word, and they waited until he had left the dining-room before they loudly mocked at the irascible officer.

They were all wrong, though, in imagining that a lady had called for him at the club. Not one did Octave know in town, and poor Thérèse would have thought twice before taking such a liberty. Besides, she was ignorant that her defender belonged to this aristocratic club; and, anyway, she would not have come here for him.

Still the call was indirectly allied to his love affairs, for the card handed in by the servant bore the name of Jean Caradoc. The captain, therefore, eagerly clutched this occasion to cut an unpleasant situation short. He had gained his ends, which were to vent his ire upon one of the rattlebrains, contemners of women, and detractors of Thérèse Tercier. It was certain that M. de Chavigny would not shirk, and the assurance of fighting him on the morrow sufficed him.

Besides, he was impatient to learn what had happened after his departure from the Jardin d'Acclimatation, and he was vastly grateful to brave old Bask-in-the-Sun for having thought to bring him news without waiting over the night.

CHAPTER VI.

COMRADES.

THE captain found his visitor in the reception-room, and was at once surprised to see him clad in black, and wearing the hard, high round hat under which civilized society is oppressed. The ex-corporal had deemed it more presentable not to come to the club in his showman's uniform, which too closely resembled a livery, and Parentis was glad he had taken this course.

'Excuse me, captain,' said the good fellow, 'I wanted badly to speak with you this evening, and went to the Grand Hotel. You were not there, as we see ; but I learnt that you nearly always dined at your club, and this is how I am here.'

'You have acted properly. I shall keep you with me as we go away.'

'To your rooms, captain ?'

'No, out on the boulevard. We are liable to be disturbed here ; and you must have many things to tell me.'

'Rather,' sighed Grippe-Soleil.

Side by side they went down the grand staircase, the hall porter taking Jean Caradoc for some officer in mufti. He looked it, and wonderfully well set off the black frock-coat buttoned up to the throat in soldierly fashion.

Parentis wanted to avoid the throng, so he proceeded towards the Madeleine Church westward, flanked by Bask-in-the-Sun, who would have followed him to the world's end.

'Captain,' said he, 'I've been given my walking ticket.'

'How's that?'

'Oh, it's not a long story. The manager of the gardens sent for me and told me he could dispense with my services. I was to decamp straightway.'

'What for?'

'On account of the cobra affair. He said the gentleman was bitten through my fault.'

'It was in some degree mine, since it was I asked you to let him into the reserved space.'

'But you could not foresee any more clearly than I, that he would be such an ass as to lay his hand on the basket of mischief. However, there must be a scapegoat, and I catch it.'

'Unjustly, by heaven! I will go see this manager, and explain how things happened.'

'It's not worth the trouble. I have my money out of them, and besides, I do not want to resume the business. I have had enough of looking after Singalese.'

'I can understand that. But here you are without a place, and I do not mean you to suffer. Until you find another, dip into my purse.'

'Thank you, captain, but I am not in need. I made money in Ceylon, and arrived in Paris with a good round sum in a note on the *Comptoir d'Escompte.* I may even tell you, monsieur, that I am not sorry to be off the active list, for I can set about my private affairs.'

'Oh yes—your American uncle?'

'He, and others, captain. All the better if I manage to grasp Uncle Chamboulive's leavings, but I have also some evil to repair.'

'Yes, I know,' said Parentis, but slenderly interested in Bask-in-the-Sun's search of relationship; 'but it is that scoundrelly snake-performer whom they should have punished—he did it expressly.'

'I am convinced of that, captain, and told the manager so, and my own speculator, and the police commissaire——'

'The commissaire? Have the police entered into the case?'

'Rather! All of them, plain clothes and uniform, and the superintendent—in short, the great devil and all his little imps. They questioned everybody, and it lasted two hours. At one time it looked as if they would lock up the whole troupe and me in the deepest dungeon.'

'I say it was the snake-charmer whom they ought to have caged.'

'Baroda? Guilt was written on his forehead; but the rogue suspected as much, and while they were mobbing the poor chap who went over to the skeleton army, Baroda cut away.'

'There cannot be any difficulty in finding him, by reason of his chocolate skin. He cannot go far from Paris without being arrested.'

'I don't know so much about that! He is cunning as a fox, and is choke-full of dodges. I would not be surprised if he had one to whitewash himself. He was not a Thug for nothing before he became a juggler—those chaps are all wizards, captain.'

'Yes, in India; but wizards do not amount to much in Paris.'

'Even at Paris money can do lots of things, and Baroda has money—a great deal, too, as I have told you. That is why I am confident that they'll not catch him. The best of the joke is that he carried away the cobras.'

'What, the basket?'

'That's what he stole away with.'

'That's too bad! Do the police know about it?'

'Completely. The commissaire, being a man who looks far ahead, ordered the basket to be burned, and the vermin in it; but when they went to make a bonfire of it, they found Baroda had cleared away everything.'

Very much astonished, Parentis wondered whether the villain might not be meditating some new vengeance. The bride would fall after the bridegroom.

'Let me see,' he remarked, 'you believe that he was jealous of that young wife, and——'

'I am sure of it. I know the wretch thoroughly, and when I saw his eyes a-blazing, I understood he was up to some game. He would have murdered twenty men to get hold of her, and I hope the poor little girl will never fall into his clutches. She might as well be seized by a 'rang-outang of Borneo

—I dare say you have heard of them?—the giant monkeys who carry women off into the tree-tops and strangle them——'

'Happily, we are not in Borneo.'

'All the same, captain, she ought to keep her weather-eye skinned, especially as——'

'Go on!'

'If you only knew what went on there after you walked away! I can tell you she did a clever thing in getting out of it. Would you believe it? whilst his son was writhing in the last spasms, his father did nothing but go on frightful against her, without a tear in his eyes, the old flintheart! He blubbered, "I am ruined! Whoever will carry on the works!" and went on to say—but I don't care to repeat what he said.'

'Why not?'

'Because I fancy you are interested in the lady——'

'Tush! Speak out just the same.'

'Well, he said—"It's that jade killed him!"'

'Oh, the wretch!'

'I was stung by that! I believe I should have beaten him if his son's dead body had not been by. It still lies there, by the way, in the pagoda, where it was left when they all flew away like a flock of sparrows. It's a queer family!'

'Yes, it is fortunate the poor girl is well out of it.'

'Hum! That old man will find some way to do her an ill turn. He has already set about it.'

Parentis knew this well; but he was astonished that his old soldier should be so deeply informed, as he had not been a bystander at the claim for the jewellery. The other explained.

'He had the impudence to spout it out to everybody there. He said she had bewitched his boy, and that she knocked about in all the bad places in town——'

'And you did not stop him?'

'I tried, but did not succeed. He shouted louder than me, and did worse than that, for he told the police official that she had paid Baroda to make his cobra bite her husband. He accused her of murder, no less!'

'I hope the police commissaire did not take this stupid calumny seriously,' exclaimed Parentis.

'I don't know,' answered Grippe-Soleil. 'Police officers reckon everything of value, and remember all they hear. This one nodded his head gravely, and asked after the bride's whereabouts. Papa replied that she had eloped with a swell, meaning you.'

'Beyond a doubt, this man is the meanest scamp living!'

'That's true! he is so mean that he gave him the little lady's address in the Boulevard Beaumarchais, and entreated him to arrest her as soon as possible; but the police official told him not to meddle with what did not concern him, and hushed him up. I saw the rogue disgusted him, and I believe, further, that he will leave the lady at rest. Anyhow, if she is worried, she will not trouble to clear herself. Everybody saw that she never breathed a word to Baroda. I will be the first to stick up for her and swear to it. Besides, how could she have struck a bargain with one not knowing a word of French ?'

'She may have to undergo an examination none the less.'

'I fear so, and I also believe she had better be notified about what is brewing. Excuse me giving you my advice, but it seems to me you bear her interest, and she is so unfortunate that I wish her well, too. It follows, captain, that I would with pleasure go and inform her, and even guard her against Baroda.'

'Do you really believe that villain——'

'He is capable of anything, and I would assist the police, who are after him, to put him out of ability to do harm. I can pretty well guess where he has gone. He has, to my knowledge, a correspondent here—a native of Ceylon, in business in Europe, who plays the pendulum between Paris and London. He is a pearl and diamond dealer, although he has several other strings to his bow. The pair may easily have been footpads together in Bengal and elsewhere.'

As Parentis did not snap at his offer, Bask-in-the-Sun went on :

'It is a matter of course, captain, that I should do nothing without your authority. If the party is indifferent to you, I shall not busy myself about her, but upon my own affairs. At the Grand Hotel, this afternoon, I did not care to ask about my uncle Chamboulive, who lodged there; but I will go there again in the morning, and look to you, captain, for that introduction to the hotel manager which you promised me.'

Whilst the trooper was speaking, his former captain questioned himself as to letting him into his confidence on his new amour. He was strongly tempted to do it, for he did not doubt his utter devotion, and he knew by experience that the Spahi was a man of resources, as ingenious as bold, one who could not be 'fogged,' as troopers say. Under the present circumstances, old Bask-in-the-Sun might be a precious auxiliary, and his help was almost compulsory from his having played an active part in the event which was the starting-point of this complicated state of things. Still, the veteran professed the strong opinion that women are created to be the ruin of mankind. This the officer knew, and how much it would cost him to own to his former subordinate that he was lost in love for Thérèse Tercier, even to the point of wedding her. Yet he made up his mind to it, chiefly from the motive that, as matters stood, he could not afford to leave this acolyte out of the struggle he would have to sustain against Thérèse's enemies.

'Hearken!' he said; 'chance has brought us together after years of parting, and chance has done well. You have often said you were under obligations to me, and would be happy to prove your gratitude. So I believe I can wholly rely upon you, and I am going to entrust to you what I would not let anyone else know. I have fallen in love, old comrade—as deeply so as you when you were twenty, and as I myself never did. At my age it is ridiculous, but it is a fact!'

'I envy your fate, captain, for I regret the time when my heart was not hardened by the life I have since led. Since you are blessed with love, I rejoice to be of service to you. Of course, it is the young widow?'

'Yes, my brave friend, and I intend marriage.'

The hearer made a wry face.

'Can she produce the dower laid down in the rules and regulations as being necessary?' he inquired.

'She has nothing,' said Parentis, forgetting the fifteen hundred francs per annum left by Thérèse's mother.

'Then, captain, the Minister of the War Department will refuse you the authorization. I know you are rich enough to find the little lady the requisite capital, though. But I do hope that you will not send in your resignation in order to marry her.'

'I shall go as far as that, if needs must.'

'The deuce!'

'You have no right to blame me, if so you do, for surely you regret having cast off the woman you loved; the proof of which is, that you are looking her up to remedy the wrong. You came to Paris expressly for that.'

'That's true, captain, but I am not an officer.'

'There are not two sets of morals for privates and officers. An honourable man does not ruin an honourable woman, but he weds her.'

'Granted, captain. The whole point is not to be deceived.'

'You mean to say one must not mistake a reprobate for an honest woman.'

'Such cases have occurred.'

'Yes, but this is not one of them. I know the past life of my beloved, and I am sure there is nothing in it she can be reproached for.'

'Of such things no man can make sure, captain.'

'Eh? are you joining in the old chorus! Well, let's drop the subject. I shall get along without you.'

'You do not understand me, captain. I am quite ready to serve you, but I must frankly warn you that, if I see you have made a bad choice, I shall tell you so.'

'You would be right, and I should be grateful to you.'

'All right, then. I will do all you wish. How can I be useful?'

'In the first place, be my second in a duel I have just arranged to come off to-morrow.'

'I couldn't ask any finer fun, captain. But—but I am a poor dog, and if, as I suppose, your antagonist is a spruce gentleman——'

'He is not up to your mark. You have been a soldier, and wear the war medal.'

'Yes; but only this morning I wore a mountebank's costume, which much resembled a livery.'

'It's enough that you haven't it upon you now. Besides, when a man has your titles to consideration, you are the equal of any stay-at-home sprig of nobility.'

'Phew! a nobleman, is he?'

'A viscount.'

'Of course, he will choose seconds of his own degree?'

'That's probable, and the more so as the dispute arose in the clubhouse, in the presence of several gentlemen, from amongst whom, I suppose, he will select two for upholders on the ground. But what matters this to you?'

'Nothing, if they will accept me. But you have still another friend to add to me.'

'I have none in town at this moment. There's only my cousin, the fair man who was with me in the Jardin d'Acclimatation, and I do not want to apply to him. You must find one yourself.'

'But, captain, I do not know a soul here.'

'Pooh! go drop into the Café du Helder, where you will meet some old comrade of the Tonkin army. Tell him that Captain Octave de Parentis stands in needs of a service. He will certainly have heard me mentioned there, and will accept. At all events, you will have plenty of time. My adversary's seconds will call on me in the morning, and I will see you afterwards.'

'Is it he who demands satisfaction of you? Then he is the offended party?'

'He says so. Well, the fact is, I did treat him badly in words. He was wrong from the first; but still I do not want to debate the advantage he claims, and I intend letting him have the choice of weapons—sword, pistol or cavalry sabre, as he pleases.'

'The straight sword will be best for you; I have seen you fence, captain, and I know you are of a very pretty class. Besides, you may get maimed with pistols or sabres, instead of killed decently.'

'It is all one to me as long as I fight.'

'So the affair is one of the sort that cannot be arranged, eh? Nevertheless, you told me that it was only a matter of words.'

'True, but the gentleman displeases me, and I mean to administer a serious lesson to him.'

'You know what you are about better than I, captain, and I do not allow myself to give you advice. Still, since you charge me to represent you, I must be informed of the ground of the difference in order to discuss it with the gentlemen.'

'My adversary said annoying things at table, which I promptly took up.'

'About what, captain?'

'About—hang it all! you are becoming a nuisance with your questions!' exclaimed Parentis. 'Let it be enough for you to know that I all but told the gentleman he was a fool, and do not you trouble about the rest.'

'Captain,' said Bask-in-the-Sun, without any emotion, 'I am only persisting because of my idea that there's a woman for the subject of the dispute.'

'What of it, if so?'

'Then, I venture to say, it is not worth while your risking your life.'

'That is your opinion; it is not mine. And, since a duel because of a woman is contrary to your principles, I shall dispense with your services, and seek another second.'

'I am not refusing to be yours, captain, and you do me much honour in selecting me. But you must agree that, if I am ignorant of what's in question, I shall not be able to answer the gentlemen you send me to regulate the conditions of the meeting. They will know, for their principal will not have your reasons to keep things dark.'

'Bother the smelling-bottle of a manikin! he would be only too glad to publish it.'

'That being so, allow me to observe that his seconds will not hamper themselves about telling me what happened. I prefer to learn it from you.'

'Well, yes,' said the captain, with ill-humour; 'it was about a woman—one whom you know.'

'The pretty widow? I guessed that long since.'

'You are really too sharp.'

'It was not a puzzler. You are thinking of nobody else lately, and I am not amazed at your getting vexed if that gentleman ran her down.'

'He said that she had sung at the Ambassadeurs' Music-hall.'

'Devil he did!'

'And that she had lovers before her marriage.'

'Thunderation!'

'But the rascal lied.'

'It is possible, but not certain.'

'She herself declared to me, without my asking her, that she had been on the stage, and had always properly conducted herself off it.'

'Women never speak but half the truth.'

'I am glad to believe that she spoke it in full.'

'Faith alone saves us; but in your place, captain, before fighting for the lady, I should make some inquiries, and, even though they had a satisfactory result, I do not believe I should make a match of it.'

'Again that stuff!'

'Again, and for ever, captain. If I were not devoted to the death to you, I should bottle up my sentiments for private consumption; but I love you for your own sake, and my duty is to tell you that it looks as though you were going to make a blunder.'

Grippe-Soleil had been on the point of employing a more harsh term, but he had changed the word 'stupidity' upon his lips in deference to his former commanding officer.

'Take the trouble to reason, captain,' he proceeded. 'Here stands a little woman as pretty as a picture, and as downtrodden as the stones of the street—a little through her own fault, for she was not forced to marry that big lout. I can understand people pitying her, consoling her, and even defending her. I am right willing to lend a helping hand myself; but nothing proves that she has not skipped over the ropes before she came up to the scratch in the hymeneal prize-ring; and if she did kick over the traces, like so many others, you must admit that she does not deserve your getting into a scrape for her. To marry her would be madness, and to fight for her is altogether too —too much.'

'It is too late to retreat. You are not advising me, I hope, to make an apology to that musk-rat?'

'Apologize? never, captain! you've drawn the wine, down with it! Now that I know on what the matter turns, I will arrange a duel that will end lovely. But in heaven's name do not marry the woman!'

'Dash it all! I am not going to marry to-morrow! but, anyhow, I am bent on crossing swords with that gentleman.'

'You shall, captain, unless he backs out, which is not likely. He will stand up to you out of vanity, and he will get himself hurt. Let me arrange it all—only, do not be in a hurry about the rest. You have six months' leave, and there is always plenty of time to spoil your life.'

This time, Parentis did not reply. He felt that wisdom was speaking by the lips of Bask-in-the-Sun; but truth is hard of digestion to lovers, and it went against the grain to confess that he had entered too lightly into his course.

Whilst conversing, the two, after coming to the Madeleine, had mechanically taken the Rue Royale, crossed the Place de la Concorde slantingly, and were now going up the Avenue of the Champs Elysées. The side walk which they used was not deserted as it is of a winter's evening, but still it was not crowded with promenaders as in the height of summer. A few loungers were finishing the cigars lit in the restaurant, and a few beauties, easy of conquest, were sitting on the let-out chairs, awaiting their captivators ; that was all.

The summer circus was still open, but not for long, and the open-air music-halls were making the most of the fag-end of the harvest. It was mid-September, and the close of this month, so dear to sportsmen and gourmands, brings yearly the fall of the leaves, and the shutting up of the *al-fresco* entertainments. They were in full blaze this evening, and fragments of music came to the ears of the dialoguists, although they did not heed them, absent in mind as they were ; Parentis from his growing passion, and Bask-in-the-Sun from anxiety on the future of his dear officer.

'Then I may rely on you in the morning?' suddenly inquired the amorous Octave.

'Absolutely,' replied the other ; 'at any time you state.'

'Come at noon ; by when I shall have seen M. de Chavigny's seconds. By the way, I must have your address, in order to refer them to you. Where are you staying?'

'Nowhere for the moment. I was living at the Jardin, but I am houseless since they sent me off. I'll find some temporary lodgings for the night, and get into a respectable hotel early to-morrow, not far from yours, for I hope you will let me see you often.'

'As often as you like.'

'Thank you, captain. I would ask you another thing, if I dared; but I am afraid of boring you.'

'Say it, at any rate. I can only refuse you.'

'Well, I would like you to present me to the lady of your love—the widow. Of course, I could go and see her myself,' he added, as the captain frowned, 'for I heard her address which the old bear gave the police commissaire; but she would mistrust me.'

'Why do you want to see her?'

'The better to defend her. It will be good for her to know that Baroda may try some trick of his own style upon her. Once warned, she will be on her guard; and I shall watch over her, too.'

'You exaggerate the danger. I do not doubt the old Thug has bad designs; but there's no chance for Thugs in Paris.'

'Baroda is a civilized Thug. The police may strive their best to catch him, but they will not; whilst I, who am up to his dodges——'

Instead of finishing the sentence, Bask-in-the-Sun stopped short, and laid his hand on the other's arm, who wanted to know the cause.

'Don't speak so loud, I beg, and let us turn off to the right a little.'

Parentis suffered himself to be led away towards the five-sided tree-planted circus-plots. He feared that his follower had gone crazy. When they had left the asphalte strip which runs down the midst of the side-walks, the old Spahi whispered to the officer:

'Do you see them?'

'Who?' demanded Parentis impatiently.

'Those two men walking side by side.'

The other looked, and saw a gigantic man beside a good-sized companion, but less tall and heavily built. The former was attired like anybody else; the other wore a long pelisse, coming down to his very heels, and a Circassian or Cossack fur cap crushed down over his eyes. They walked measuredly and spoke animatedly, although they did not gesticulate. They were going towards the Place de la Concorde, and they passed on without perceiving the two gentlemen watching them under the trees.

'Well, who are they?' inquired the captain.

'One of them, at least, I know,' returned the ex-corporal.

'Which?'

'The bigger man. It's the diamond merchant I was speaking about a while ago.'

'And the other?'

'Baroda, maybe.'

'Nonsense! I would recognise him.'

'Not by the tip of his nose, which is all we see.'

'Where could he have got that dress of the Armenian Jews?'

'Dashed if I know! but I am going to learn, and more too, for I shall follow him.'

'You had better make haste, for there they go among the chairs, and the taller man is beckoning for a cab.'

'Yes; I have no time to lose. But there are plenty of empty cabs along the road, and I shall take one to catch his. Keep well till to-morrow, captain!'

Grippe-Soleil flew across the side-walk, and Parentis saw him leap into a victoria; whilst the two men got into a closed carriage a little farther on.

'It is clear he is not in his right mind,' muttered Parentis. 'He sees Baroda everywhere. Let him run after him! I wish him well, and that he may lay hold of him. But I begin to believe that I did wrong in speaking at such length of Thérèse.'

CHAPTER VII.

THE SATELLITES OF 'THE STAR.'

HE was a man of impulse, and this was not the first time in his life that he regretted having gone onward too fast. Truth to say, he had been superheated the whole day through. In the first place, as regards the bride in the Zoological Gardens; next, against the Viscount de Chavigny; and lastly, against Bask-in-the-Sun, whom he had selected for second purely because he was within reach. His repentance for letting him into confidence about his bosom secret sprang from his prevision that the old soldier—whilst protecting Thérèse Tercier after his own manner—would do his utmost to prevent a marriage of which he disapproved. Perhaps he had better have thanked him; instead of being grateful to him, however, he determined to show him the cold shoulder after the duel. He did not fully take as serious the ex-corporal's fears on the head of Baroda, and he had not been tempted to follow him in the Singalese hunt, out of which he anticipated no good would come.

He was, moreover, glad to be alone, in order to set his thoughts in order, somewhat confused by the dinner-table incident. He had given the lie to M. de Chavigny's remarks; but these were graven on his memory, and he could not help taking them into consideration up to a certain point.

Probably the young noble had exaggerated in alluding to Thérèse's lightness of conduct before marriage, and cousin Coulibœuf had certainly boasted when asserting she would become his conquest if she came out before the public anew; but there might be a foundation of truth under the malevolent chit-chat.

Was it really she who, beneath the transparent stage-name of Teresa, had sung during one whole season at the Ambassadeurs'? The captain only wished he could doubt it. The description given by the gentlemen of the vanished artiste and her champion of last year tallied closely enough with that of the one day's bride and the unfortunate Jacques Bonhomme; but still this did not prove that it was the same person. The analogy of names was not a certain proof either. There had been, and there were, more than one Thérèse—the spelling a trifle varying from that of the celebrity who used to sing with so much *brio* '*Le Sapeur*' and '*La Gardeuse d'Ours*.' Besides, in speaking of her past and her future, Thérèse Tercier had said she had been on the stage and would return to it, and not 'in the music-halls.' The captain intended to have this more plain; but when would he see her? She had promised to write to him, but had not fixed the date of the next interview, and nothing announced its taking place soon, since it depended upon the success of her plans. Above all, she wanted to find an engagement, and that might be long coming. The captain had given his word not to call on her without her leave; hence he was doomed to remain in uncertainty for the time being. It is true, he had a duel to fight, which did not alarm him an iota; but it would take a day or two to get through it and its concomitants, for it could hardly be done with on the morrow. As the captain had taken Bask-in-the-Sun as second, he did not at all care to charge him to go question the lady.

He was seeking another means of more quickly informing himself when an idea struck him.

On leaving the parallel walk to the main road, he had plunged under the groups of trees in the five-sided central spaces, a road which took him over near the Café des Ambassadeurs, where the concert was in full swing, so near, in fact, that he most distinctly heard the high notes of the vocalist in vogue. Gratis music is much appreciated, and a mob besieged the environs of the concert garden, composed of economical amateurs in music who enjoyed the entertainment beyond the pale without unloosening their purse-strings.

All of a sudden the captain bethought him that he might haply gather interesting information by applying to the employés of the establishment. There are no women to open the box-doors or show you to the stalls, but there are waiters, sellers of programmes and songs of the evening, and flower-girls, the same whom cousin Savinien had questioned, so he said, about the blackeyed blonde, and who willingly took notes round behind to the ladies for a moderate reward. All these front-of-the-house attachés are more or less cognisant of what goes on behind the curtain, and they should remember the artiste unseen since the last season ended. The only trouble was to light upon a willing flower-vender and get her artfully to speak, that is, by showing her the gold coin which unlocks the tongue of these go-betweens of *al-fresco* love-making.

The captain decided upon trying the venture, but instead of going through the restaurant entrance, where he might meet with fellow-members of his club, he went in by the side where the orchestra rises before the stage. Two motives impelled this —his wishing to preserve the incognito, and this part of the auditorium being most fit for the carrying out of his project. He had often come here in old times and knew the manners and customs of the patrons. He knew that the particular friends of the singing ladies clustered in a corner very near the stage, and that the flower-girls roamed by preference where they hoped most easily to 'plant' their goods—the expression is happy.

On this evening, there were less admirers than usual, on account of the weather threatening rain. On the other hand, by way of recompense to the proprietor, the terrace of the restaurant, a covered-in space, swarmed with women 'known to the police' and fast men in high glee, to the greater consumption of champagne.

The corks were popping like cartridges at a sham battle and this special class of the audience made a mighty uproar, as is the rule at such resorts.

The curtain went down on the first part of the programme.

The captain installed himself close to the stage, and to conform to the rule which supposes you pay for refreshment and not for admission, he ordered a glass of beer which he had no intention of damaging his life-assurance policy by swallowing. The waiter who served him was such a dull looking fellow that Parentis judged nothing could be drawn from him and he looked round for a flower-seller. Three were circulating among the chairs, offering their bouquets without seeming to succeed very brilliantly.

He was isolated so that he could speak with one without hearers, and he studied their countenances in order to address the most intelligent. Bashfulness was not one of his faults, but still he was a trifle embarrassed how to begin this little affair. It is very simple to buy some flowers and send them to a performer and, when a man pays liberally, he may have ample biographical details on the object of the tribute thrown into the bargain. It is not even indispensable to know the lady's name: you merely indicate the one in a red or in a blue dress and down come the hints and tales in a shower. But it is less easy to question a flower-girl about a vocalist no longer in the company, for there is then no such excuse as the carriage of the bouquet to the person, and the gold piece has to be bluntly clapped upon the palm. Nine times out of ten it is greedily grasped, but an exceptionally squeamish nosegay-vender may refuse, and the captain feared being taken for a detective and publicly abused as such.

Savinien de Coulibœuf would have been bolder under the same circumstances. Parentis hesitated, although he had the coin ready to commence the colloquy with a solid argument, as he waited for one of the women to approach. They did not hurry themselves, nor did the curtain to rise, and the audience began to grumble. Soon there were voices rising on the dining-room terrace in a chorus of a name Parentis did not hear distinctly, but it would be that of a vocalist of one or the other sex called out to be jeered or applauded. Ordinarily, nobody is called on but after a song or act ; never in the *entr'acte*.

Unable to understand anything of this novel manifestation, Parentis stood up the better to see the rioters. They were grouped around a table where sat some females in 'loud' attire, and among them the captain fancied he recognised his amiable relative Coulibœuf in the foremost rank, who, to send his voice farther, made a speaking-trumpet of his hands. During dinner at the club, he had announced he would finish the evening at this music-hall, so that Parentis need not have been startled to behold him here. But why did he make such an uproar ? Parentis could not divine this ; and on the point he determined to question the flower-girl who, at last, bore down upon him.

'What are those people up there making so much noise about ?' he inquired.

'Oh, rubbish ! They want a young lady who sang here last year,' returned the woman contemptuously. 'Anybody but a fool would know she cannot be produced to-night, for she left at the end of the season. Those "mashers" are mad, that's all ! Just hear them shout, to the tune of *Les Lampions*, "Teresa, Teresa !" I'll leave it to you, monsieur, if there's any sense in 'em,' continued the flower-girl, who was a mature woman with a very wide-awake air. 'They roar for Teresa, and it's all one—as crying for the moon. Do they imagine the manager is going to send a cab for their Teresa? I can't make it out.'

The captain could.

The shouts arose from one single table on the terrace, where Savinien led the chorus, waving his cane like an orchestral leader's bâton. Other persons called out merely to add to the noise, but the audience in the hall took no part in it, and even began to hush the clamourers.

It followed that the witty Coulibœuf had organised this silly tumult in concord with the several notorious women invited by the Russian to the restaurant. No doubt he thought to give a good turn to the captain by forcing the management into re-engaging the songstress whom the officer deemed virtue itself. However, Coulibœuf might only be intoxicated, as often happened him. The captain made up his mind to break off all connection with this dangerous kinsman, after telling him why and pulling his ears.

At the same time this was a good opening, and the captain took care not to miss it.

'Let me see: was not this Teresa a fair woman, who sang sentimental songs?' he inquired, trying to assume an indifferent air.

'That's the one, monsieur,' responded the dealer in flowers; 'and the very prettiest girl we've had in all the five years I have been here. And some talent, too, bless you! A voice of gold; and she spoke her lines of "patter" so you could understand 'em. I am dreadfully sorry she's gone, for she got me a sale of no end of flowers!'

'Then she must have been much liked?'

'Liked? I should say so! Gentlemen came from the Jockey Club to see her; and she was downright bombarded with bouquets.'

'And love proposals, too, I suppose?'

'What do you think? There was a mob at the stage-door after the concert was over, and not cads like most of our other singers get, but real swells, with private carriages waiting for 'em in the Avenue Gabriel. You ought to have seen it, monsieur! It's all her own fault if she did not make her fortune.'

'Do you mean to say she was "quiet?"' anxiously queried Parentis.

'Oh, I don't know anything about that; but she never let anybody see her home—that I am sure of. I dare say she had a fellow of her own—regular company, you know. There was one gent—came every night—a big bully, not a swell at all, with friends who kicked up enough row to shiver all the glasses. All the ladies said in the end that it was her fancy man.'

The captain felt a pang in his heart. This unaristocratic courtier was evidently Bonhomme, *minor*; and the nosegay-vendor seemed to admit that, as Coulibœuf asserted, Thérèse was his steady 'company.'

'Why did she go away at the top of her success?' demanded Parentis.

'She didn't; for she was here to the end of the season. But she did not return in the spring, like the swallows. I did hear say that she had gone and got married. A fine bit of foolery that would 'a' been, for the manager would be very glad to get her back at a rise of salary. But how can we help it, monsieur? girls are always like that—dreaming of getting married; but when the lovely marriage breaks down six months after, it's not worth the bother, I say! You will see Teresa back again next year.'

The amorous officer hoped the reverse. Granting that the early information received was not wholly reassuring, it had not discouraged him, and he persisted in believing in Thérèse's pure fame. But it was really she under debate, and he could not doubt that the lovable girl had been the delight before her nuptials of the frequenters of this music-hall. Until this he had regarded her as an actress. Now he had to see in her a star of lesser magnitude.

But what did it matter, all things considered?

A first-class music-hall is worth any minor theatre, and the morality is about the same, with the difference that the two sexes do not mix in a green-room, as they do in the petty playhouses. In the Paris music-halls, the artistes remain and sing all the evening, and hence a singer's husband, mother, or duenna can see her to the place, and, after three hours, call to take her home when she has earned her night's money.

Octave de Parentis was certainly not tempted to play the character of the husband of the serio-singer, one so ungrateful that Jacques Bonhomme would not accept it. But the summer was nearly over, and the concert-gardens would close; before the re-opening the knot would be cut in one way or another: either Parentis would be cured of his infatuation, and be on the road back to Tonkin, or else Thérèse Tercier would be his wife and never more think of setting foot on that platform.

Out of these reflections our captain was drawn by the flower-vendor, who said in an insinuating tone:

'Anyway, the house can do without Teresa if she does not come back. We have quite as attractive girls here, and some with as much talent. Has the gentleman heard Mdlle. Coralie sing "My Lovely Creole"? No? She's awfully charming! as you will see presently when the second part begins. She is very fond of roses, and I have splendid blooms to-night if you'd like to give her some.'

The captain had no longing to enwreath Mdlle. Coralie, but he put a louis into the obliging speaker's hand, intending to question her further; this was a payment in advance for the supplementary intelligence.

Whilst she was overwhelming him with thanks, the din heightened. Louder than ever the diners on the terrace, excited by Coulibœuf, were whooping 'Teresa!' and the rest of the audience, carried away by the cries, had joined in the cry. Some may have thought it was the popular diva they were calling for, albeit she had retired on her fortune and to give lessons in elocution to ladies of high degree—so the rumour ran. The furore was increasing and was already so formidable that Coulibœuf ought to be proud of his work.

At this juncture the curtain rose, but not to continue the entertainment, as the musicians of the orchestra were not in their places.

'Hillo! the stage-manager is going to make a speech,' observed the flower-girl. 'Has Coralie fallen ill?'

Silence spread as by enchantment when all saw a gentleman come forward in black and wearing a white tie, as in a theatre which prides itself on doing the thing stylishly.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' said this grave figure after a bow, 'the management of the *Concert des Ambassadeurs*, always desirous of pleasing the public, empowers me to announce that it has just re-engaged a popular and successful artiste, whom private affairs momentarily retired from our stage. I have the pleasure of stating that Mdlle. Teresa, the great serio-songster, whose success last season was so stupendous and legitimate, will reappear next season in all her old repertoire, together with many new songs.'

At the qualifying words, 'next season,' there were several 'Bahs,' promptly drowned by enthusiastic bravos.

'Mdlle. Teresa,' continued the acting-manager, 'to gratify the very flattering call of the audience, consents to make an exceptional reappearance, however, on Saturday next, and she will sing every evening until the end of September.'

Applause burst forth, smothering the outcries of several much too ravenous spectators who roared:

'No, no!—let's have her at once! Put her on to-night!'

The manager bowed himself off backwards, whilst the curtain came down.

This proclamation of the unexpected reappearance had so greatly astonished the Flora of the music-hall, that she had run over to question the man at the stage-door, leaving Captain de Parentis as surprised and almost as much agitated as she.

Five minutes afterwards, she returned to tell him:

'Heavens! what luck this Teresa must have! Just fancy, monsieur, that she fell like a bombshell into the manager's room a while ago to ask him to engage her—off-hand, like that! at the end of the season, when the company is full up to the mark! Of course, he couldn't think of such a thing. He did not mind for next season, but not for now. But whilst he was throwing cold water on her appeals, bless me if the whole house did not go mad a-bawling for Teresa! The manager gave in; but, in his place, I should have held out, for it's only a trick gotten up by her friends of the Jockey

Club. You must have seen yourself that the row began on the terrace.'

'What, is she here?' muttered the captain, confounded.

'Not now. She sloped as soon as she got the manager's promise. It was just as I thought: she did get married, but she has had misfortune. But wasn't I right when I said she had "fellows" in the swell world; and they remembered her, too, for they gave her a splendid lift.'

The captain was no longer listening. He had risen, and he proceeded towards the egress. His illusions were fleeing, and he sadly meditated.

'She has not waited till her husband was underground. Why was she in such a haste to be re-engaged? was it onerous on her to wait, before returning to the fast world, after having redeemed her pledge to her mother? Was not Grippe-Soleil right to say the best of womankind are worthless? I shall know about her, though, for I will have a clear understanding with her to-morrow.'

CHAPTER VIII.

A PARISIAN OF THE DECADENCE.

WHILST the bewitched Parentis was being informed upon his adored, Corporal Bask-in-the-Sun was chasing Baroda; but his evening's result was no pleasanter than the captain's. The latter had only gathered perturbing news at the café-concert, and the other had lost trail of the Singalese. He had chanced on a slow horse and a blundering cabman, who had let himself be distanced, at the mouth of the Rue de Rivoli, by the vehicle into which the pearl dealer and the snake-performer had stepped.

However, he was soon consoled for having missed them. He knew the jewel merchant's address, and was convinced that Baroda could take refuge only under the roof of that equivocal trader. So he felt sure to find him there—an assurance that satisfied him for the moment, as he was much less excited than M. de Parentis, who wanted to finish all who annoyed him at one fell swoop. Bask-in-the-Sun only cared to serve his old commander, but experience had taught him that nothing is done by over-haste; and, moreover, he lacked enthusiasm for all matters hinging on the union of the captain with the bereaved Madame Bonhomme.

He knew Parentis since a long while, and by heart, too. At Saigon, he had seen him fall in love with a recently-landed strolling actress, set up as her knight, and fight two or three duels for a joker who only laughed at him and ran away with a Chinaman, farmer of gaming-hells and vendor of opium—the two most lucrative callings in Cochin-China. The ex-Spahi feared the hasty freaks of the inflammable officer, and vowed to check them, even if he had to do so sharply or by proving that Thérèse was no better than any of the love-birds of passage who charm the leisure of officers in the distant garrisons of the Far East. At this time, though, he had other cares than opening an inquiry upon the conduct of the young widow.

He was on the street as much as a man can be who has some money in his pocket—and he needed shelter for the night. He found it in a modest hotel in the Rue de la Michodière, which he took not without motive, for it was situated in close proximity to the Grand Hotel, and a few steps from the Café du Helder, the centre of the operations to be undertaken next day.

His captain had put up at the Grand, and his uncle Chamboulive had died there. Bask-in-the-Sun intended to make the Helder Café his head-quarters. Since his arrival in town with the Singalese, he had gone there to spend the few hours' freedom left by his duties at the Zoological Gardens, and he had there met comrades, who, more fortunate than he, had made their way in the army, but did not disdain clinking the canikin with an old corporal of spahis. It was here he expected to find the second Octave de Parentis stood in need of. He lay down and went off to sleep like a babe, and rose with the dawn to get to work.

At noon his captain looked for him, so he had ample time to do things properly against that appointment hour. He began by going after a box left at the gardens, profiting by the occasion to give good-bye to the keepers, and even the Singalese. Chatting with them, he learnt that

Baroda had not reappeared, and that nobody expected to see him again. They appraised him at his proper value, and supposed that, without troubling about his engagement with the Society of Acclimatation, he had gone to give a show on his own account in London, where any kind of phenomenon can always make a living. At all events, he had not returned home, for he had plenty of cash to pay for touring. His fellow-countrymen did not deplore him, regarding him, as they did, as a turncoat and renegade, for the reason of his keeping himself to himself, and shewing a plentiful lack of religious fervour. Baroda was a most lukewarm Buddhist, and a completely perverted Singalese.

Furthermore, it did not appear that the police official had any intention of carrying the investigation farther which had been opened upon the death of the hapless Jacques Bonhomme, bitten by one of Baroda's snakes. When the gentleman returned in the evening, he ordered the remains to be removed, and declared that, in his opinion, there were no grounds for prosecuting the snake-charmer, and still less the bride, who had evidently no hand in the accident. The respectable family of the defunct had shown no signs of life, and everything betokened that the only result of this odd occurrence would be the newspaper publication of a fact interesting enough alone, without need to be spiced by venturesome comments.

On the whole, this was agreeable tidings for

Grippe-Soleil, who dreaded most of all to see his captain implicated in an ugly affair. He was sure, now, that the widow would not be annoyed by the police, and would have only Baroda to fear. He was inclined to aid her, although he but half interested himself in her, and he flattered himself he should cure M. de Parentis of an unfortunate passion, by demonstrating that there is no great inconvenience in having a flirtation with a music-hall cantatrice, but that a man who has the honour to wear the epaulette ought not to marry such a woman.

Having nothing more to do at the gardens, he took leave of the Singalese and their elephants and returned to town, carrying away his luggage, which he left at his hotel office, whilst he went straight off to sit at a table on the terrace of the café, where he hoped to recruit a second. It was the hour for the morning 'eye-opener,' and there was no scarcity of customers; but Bask-in-the-Sun did not perceive one acquaintance's physiognomy, and he had to resign himself to drinking alone. The troopers call this 'playing the Swiss,' probably because the Swiss mercenaries serving in France were saving men, and did not willingly treat their comrades. This was not a failing of the corporal, for he liked to chink glasses, and rather than go on imbibing solitarily, he would have invited the first comer to keep him company. But he was not reduced to this extremity to-day.

He had not been five minutes in his place, and scientifically diluting the green absinthe with little dashes of water, before a gentleman came without any ceremony to sit beside him, saying:

'How do you do, old comrade? In Paris, eh? Eh? what!' he went on, as Grippe-Soleil stared at him instead of answering; 'don't you know me? Yet we rather often went on the spree together, in the old days—when I served six months in your own squadron.'

'Stop a bit! I fancy now that indeed——'

'In Africa—in the Oran Spahis. I just joined when you left to go to Cochin-China.'

'I remember you now; but refresh me with your name.'

'Daubrac—Charles Daubrac.'

'The fellow they called 'the Little Parisian?'

'I have not grown, and I am still Parisian,' replied the new-comer merrily.

'I rather believe we did have some high jinks there! It's a pleasure to meet you again. Not in the army now?'

'Oh, no! only had a year of it. I did have a fancy for the colours, but it very soon wore off. I grew home-sick for the boulevards.'

'What are you up to now?'

'In business.'

'On the Bourse?'

'Yes, and elsewhere. I have nothing to grumble at. I am not a rich man yet, but I shall become one some day or another; and, meanwhile, I am making no bad amount of money. How about yourself, old Caradoc?'

'Oh, I have knocked about a little everywhere, and you know the saying: "A rolling stone—"'

'"Gathers no moss." It is as stupid as most proverbs. A man must be on the move to make a fortune. Still, if you have not made yours yet, you will, my boy. Here you only have to stoop to pick up fortunes, when you have ideas and a little capital to commence operations.'

'Well, I have the little capital, enough bread in the pantry for two or three years. But I haven't any money-making ideas.'

'They'll come to you, old Caradoc. I will give you the tip.'

'Thanks, Daubrac. I do not reckon on them to get along. But here I am gabbling away when I ought to be celebrating our happy meeting. What do you take before breakfast? Absinthe or vermouth?

'I prefer a glass of Madeira.'

Grippe-Soleil hastened to call the waiter, who hurried off with the order.

'I say, Caradoc,' gaily resumed Charles Daubrac, *alias* the Little Parisian, 'you had a rich uncle in the old days. Don't you remember often saying: "When I get that fortune left me by my uncle in America, I shall keep an English racehorse and an opera dancer." Is the old hunk still alive?'

'Died last week.'

'Did he leave you the lot?'

'Don't know.'

'What do you mean by you don't know?' repeated the other. 'This is a pretty joke!'

'You are saying just the same thing as my old captain did when I told him the news. Nobody will believe me, though it is the downright truth.'

'In fact, if he died in America, I can understand your not being informed. In your place, though, I should have telegraphed. Did nunkey leave us a decent amount?'

'Four millions of francs, it appears.'

'And here you are quietly stirring up your absinthe! Great gods and little fishes! if I but had a glimpse of grabbing four millions on the other side of the ocean, I would only make one skip from the Rue de Rougemont, where I hang out, to the Atlantic steamer at Havre. I say, my old lad,' he continued, as Caradoc merely smiled without replying, 'if it's too much trouble for you to put yourself out for so little, I am ready to travel for you, and I shall only charge ten per cent. commission after the heritage is safely banked.'

'There is no necessity of crossing the briny to bank it. My uncle died in Paris.'

'Then what are you waiting for before going to his solicitor?'

'In the first place I do not know his solicitor, as you say. Anyway, I have lost no time, as it was only yesterday that I learnt that my uncle had gone over to the enemy?'

'Tut, tut! we say: "Stopped the bread bill."' 'Gone over to the enemy is worn-out slang.'

‘Excuse me, I am fresh from Ceylon, and not up to the time o’ day, my dear boy.’

‘Old stuff again! we say, “Not in the new cast,”—but it makes no matter. If your uncle left you four millions——’

‘I can’t say I have seen them.’

‘But you shall—unless he cut you off with a franc.’

‘He was quite capable of it, for he never wore me on his heart. But he had no time to make wills. He died of apoplexy.’

‘Oh, apoplexy! a malady his nephew ought to praise. I hope that you will put in your claim not later than this very morning.’

‘I shall, as twelve strikes at the Grand Hotel.’

‘Why at the Grand?’

‘Because he died there.’

‘Why, old Seventh Sleeper, wherever have you been dug up? Do you imagine you have only to call at the place where the old chap kicked the bucket and say to the concierge: ‘Here I am, the heir to Mr. Thingamy!” you would be laughed at.’

‘I am afraid so; but they will tell me what to do.’

‘I will tell you better than they, for it’s one of my special lines to look up lost heirs. I will take all the formalities upon myself and, if you are obliged to go to law, I will point out a lawyer who hasn’t his match to win such cases.’

‘Much obliged. I am not yet on the point of going into the courts, particularly as I do not know if the inheritance is worth the trouble.’

'Four millions not worth trouble! thunders and waterspouts! how much do you want?'

'I would content myself with much less, but nobody knows where his four millions are.'

'"The Hidden Four Millions, or Corporal Caradoc on Tenterhooks!" not a bad title for a farce.'

'Don't joke! it is so; all the newspapers mentioned it.'

'Newspapers! what did they say?'

'That a very rich foreigner who had settled a year in Paris, had suddenly turned up his toes.'

'Tut, tut! turned up toes are out of date, but still it can be understood,' went on the authority upon current slang. 'Dried up is shorter and clearer.'

'It was added that no bonds or deposit notes were found about him.'

'Not even one poor little savings bank book?'

'It is as I tell you. And if I do not find out where he stored his cash I am cleaned out, my boy.'

Daubrac ceased laughing and set to meditating.

'What's your uncle's name?' he suddenly inquired. 'You often spoke of him in Africa, but you never mentioned his name.'

'It's Chamboulive—my mother's.'

'Good! I have it. Ah! I believe you, my boy, the press did speak of it—nothing else; and so much so that the idea struck me of hunting after the crock of gold. I said to myself: If I can find the documents, I shall propose shares with the heirs. But since all the heirs are one head under your cap, I will content myself with a lesser portion. So you believe your Chamboulive resided at the Grand Hotel?'

'Well, I read it in a newspaper.'

'Some misinformed print, my dear boy. Chamboulive had rooms at the Grand, and there heaven called him away—or, more likely, t'other place, for he did not travel the road to paradise, excellent old Cham. though he was. But he did not live there. It was to spend a couple of hours in, daily, and have a good address for his letters, that's all.'

'Why, you seem to have known him?'

'Rather! and I am not the only one, as he enjoyed a pretty wide notoriety in the city.'

'I never suspected he would be a celebrity. For what reason, eh? if you don't mind.'

'Won't it vex you if I tell you?'

'Why should it vex me? I have not seen him since twenty-five years ago, and then he gave me his blessing backwards.'

'Then I may speak out? Well, old comrade, the Chamboulive aforesaid was a money-lender at incredible rates, and there never was a shady bit of business in Paris which he did not have a finger in.'

'Whew! if I inherit, I shall have to take dirty money.'

'I presume all that's one to you? The main thing is to be entitled to it, and find the money. Now that I know the question is about this Chamboulive, I believe in the four millions—ay, and better than that. They said he had that amount when he quitted the United States. In a year, each million has generated thousands.'

'To return to our golden fleece—if uncle only had rooms at the Grand Hotel, he must have lived elsewhere.'

'Naturally.'

'And you know where?'

'I know he had an office in the Rue Milton, where he received his clients; but he did not sleep there, for the very good reason that there was no accommodation.'

'But there was a safe there?'

'Not any more than a couch. Old Cham. was a knowing party, who carried his plunder about with him. When he lent money, he pulled a wallet crammed with bank-notes out of a secret pocket in his coat. Everybody who had dealings with him will tell you that.'

'Then ready money must have been found on him?'

'A few hundred francs—that's all; scarce enough to pay for his funeral; not that it was a swell affair, either: no, one of the eighth class, at the best, and no mourners. The pauper's funeral, less the traditional cur-dog.'

'Such a funeral from the Grand Hotel!'

'Not likely. A death always injures a hotel. So the body of Chamboulive was removed in the night to his own office, in the Rue Milton. But all went off regularly, mind you. A physician was called in to give the certificate ; the other guests in the hotel knew nothing about it ; and if you go there to seek information about your uncle's death, the answer will be that nobody knows what you are asking about.'

'I intended to go there this morning.'

'It's no use doing it, my lad. You must not seek information there, or of a solicitor, as I advised you before knowing Chamboulive was the object. Your uncle had neither solicitor nor banker.'

'Nor regular residence, it strikes me.'

'Oh, he had one. He had to sleep somewhere, for he never came to the hotel but between five and seven in the afternoon. It was during one of these visits that he was struck dead by the rush of blood. Where did he sleep. "That is the question."'

'To whom ought I apply for the answer?'

'To me, my dear Caradoc.'

'Then you know it?'

'No; but I can find out. I had already thought of taking up the affair without suspecting you were concerned in it. In other words, I will go on with it, body and soul, since you inherit. If I succeed, I will be satisfied with a moderate reward.'

'Oh, I would not bicker with you. But let me ask how you will act to discover what has baffled others?'

'That's my look out, old man. I will work like four men to serve a brother soldier, and if he had no money, I would not charge him anything for my cares and pains if the search failed. But this is not the case: for if you do inherit, there will be four millions, at the lowest estimate, and it is fair I should have my little plum. You see, I am playing above board.'

'Quite so; and we are in agreement. You will fix the amount of your share yourself.'

'All right. We will talk about that another time. But you must not be vexed at my keeping my game to myself. If I were to show you the whole bag of tricks, it would look bad for me to propose a contract with you.'

'I will sign straight away. I never break my word,' said Caradoc quickly.

'I do not doubt that, my dear fellow. But the truth is, that I know nothing positive. I only have glimpses of your uncle's life and connections, but I shall make good use of them; and I guarantee that I shall manage to lay hand on the treasure.'

'You must have known my uncle pretty well?'

'I have done business with him; but not on my own account. I never borrow money. I introduced several clients to him in his Rue Milton office. Of his life led outside that office, too, I know no end of things—a little through chance, and a good deal that the ladies let drop.'

'The ladies?' exclaimed Caradoc.

'Yes, indeed,' smilingly rejoined Charles Daubrac. 'You would not be so much startled if you did not come from the end of the world. In Paris, dear boy, women have a place in everything going on, and they know everything. Just ask the police how they contrive to catch a man they "want." They begin by trying to find his ladylove, and, having her, the rest is discovered of itself.'

'I beg your pardon, but my uncle was seventy.'

'Age has nothing to do with it; he was a hearty old buck.'

'Then he had a—a lady housekeeper?'

'No—no such fool! but he roamed about the whole rose-garden, and all was good to him—actresses, ballet-girls, fast women, and even sewing-girls. He was very widely known among all the merry hearts who like fun—they called him "Old California."'

'Oh! one of these women gave you the particulars?'

'Yes, dear boy. I am pretty well about in such circles, and I like to hear them chatter. Besides, Chamboulive made no secret of his goings on. He was to be met in the minor theatres; in the Folies Bergère Music-hall in winter, and in the Jardin de Paris and the Champs Elysées open-air concerts in summer. I have seen him a hundred times in such places. Old Cham. was a cunning rogue, who divided his life into two parts: the day for business—the night for amusement. From seven p.m. till the next morning he cut the counter and was a man about town who would not have bothered himself to earn a hundred thousand francs after sunset. Oh, he was a character—this fine old scoundrel gentleman, all of this modern town!'

'I never dreamt of it. When I was a youngster he lived like a curmudgeon.'

'Because he had not made his pile then. Since his return from America, he was always very close in business, but he parted freely with money to amuse himself. If he had not been lavish with the coin, women would not have run after him—which they did: snatched him away from one another!'

'All very well; but I should think he never told any of them where he kept his funds.'

'No, no; he spoke to them of merrier subjects.'

'And I don't suppose he ever took them to his office or the Grand Hotel?'

'Never! he went home with them unless, exceptionally, he took them to rooms hired expressly for a nocturnal revel. This did not often happen, but, when it did, he gave them a Sardanapalian orgie.'

'If anybody but you had told me this, hanged if I'd believe it! I cannot see my uncle playing Sardanapalus. Even in his youth he looked like a Limousin bricklayer's clerk—and Limousin he was.'

'He did not grow out of it. He was only Sardanapalus at times, but then he went "the whole hog." You'll appreciate the aptness of that simile, eh? Coralie told me how he carried on——'

'Who is Coralie?'

‘A pretty girl who sings lively songs at the Ambassadeurs’ Music-hall. She has been at jollifications that would call up a blush on a fireman’s brazen helmet.’

‘Whereabouts?’

‘In the hired rooms aforesaid. You are going to ask me more exactly where. I cannot tell you yet, for Coralie could not tell me.’

‘What! she does not know where my uncle took her?’

‘She knows and she knows not. She would leave her cab at the foot of the Butte Montmartre, and he would make her climb afoot through a maze of lanes and alleys to a house, high up on the hill, no doubt, but she declares herself incapable of identifying it, because she was always taken out before daylight by Chamboulive himself, who would see her to the Rochechouart Boulevard, where he would pack her into a cab to be driven home.’

‘Well, what did she see in my uncle’s tower of mystery?’

‘Incredible, unheard-of things. There would be half-a-dozen women there not known to her, who had not the effect of belonging to the governing classes.’

‘Bad ones?’

‘Beyond doubt! and lowest of the low, so Coralie asserts, and she’s not squeamish, though she has some decency yet.’

‘Go on about the place.’

‘She was convinced that Chamboulive came there to sleep every night. Saying nothing of the drawing-room lined with mirrors, where the festivals went on, she saw a sleeping chamber luxuriously furnished, a dining-room and a library. The dining-room would not often be used, as Chamboulive almost every evening dined at the Grand Hotel, but the library was full of books.'

'That does astonish me! My dear uncle was as ignorant as a fish and never read anything but newspapers, and very little of them.'

'The books he had were illustrated ones, very free. Coralie peeped into a few and said they were hot! Obscene works of the Regency and the Borgias, of course. Chamboulive, who was a shameless swine, delighted in such ordure.'

'But he would not have folded his banknotes into such books!'

'Eh, eh, who knows? the old fox may have thought to do that, knowing well that nobody would think of seeking there. Yet I grant it is far from probable. But the bonds may be elsewhere in the house, and I would have them out if I had to pull the walls down.'

'It ought not to be hard to find the house, especially when we know in what part of the town it is situated.'

'So you believe; well, that's just where you are wrong, to prove which let me tell you Coralie had a search in the broad day and never could come upon it.'

'Why should she search for it?'

'She did not tell me; but I suspect she hoped to levy blackmail on the old debauché by threatening to inform the police where he played his pranks. Our dear Coralie has not been reared in the lap of a duchess, and she has no more scruples on her conscience than there are feathers on a frog's back. She will do any mortal thing for money, and that is what I rely upon.'

'Then you reckon to have her help in your searches?'

'Yes, indeed, as the best way to succeed. I shall take her up the Montmartre hill for a stroll, but, of course, not tell her why I am so eager to find Chamboulive's snuggery. I shall hatch up some story which she will swallow, being as stupid as a goose; but I shall promise her a thousand-franc note in case of success, and she will be in the hunt, I can promise you.'

'Good so far; but when you will be in the house it will not be a captured fort. You will have still to find the treasure.'

'I undertake that. But I cannot touch it, not being mine. I will simply make sure it exists and call in some official to clap a seal on all the doors. You, in the meantime, will have collected the documents establishing your position as sole heir, which you will have merely to produce to be pronounced in possession. I will have prepared your way.'

'And I shall recompense you liberally, my dear Daubrac.'

'A third of the fortune, eh? it's worth that.'

'A third! it's a go! I will sign the promise whenever you like. But I confess not to have as much confidence as you in the result of your expedition, even admitting that this Coralie is willing to second you.'

'It will cost us nothing to have a try. Besides, I have still another string to my bow. Chamboulive lived like a bear—outside business he had no acquaintances but reprobates, of which he boasted. He said they were the only links to connect him with mankind; but he had, not a friend, for the Chamboulive sort have no friends—a confidant—an accomplice, if you prefer it—a rascal whose acquaintance he had made somewhere abroad. This rogue had finally settled down in Paris, where he carried on a whole pack of trades. They did business together, I have never known what kind; but I will wager that, if your uncle entrusted his secrets to anybody, it was to this old pirate companion with whom he hobnobbed to the last moments of his life. If I do not get on with Coralie, I will apply to this rogue. He may know of the hiding-place where Chamboulive hoarded his securities.'

'If he know that, he would go clear them out.'

'That depends. If the stocks and bonds and shares are under the subscriber's name, as I believe they are, he cannot appropriate them. Your uncle once told me that he never held certificates payable to bearer for fear of being robbed. If he spoke true, our man could not sell them; but he might sell the secret to the heir of Chamboulive. The mischief is that he may only sell them dear.'

'Oh, I would make still another sacrifice.'

'Would you go so far as to give up the half?'

'If only two millions came to me it is more than is needful for an old soldier to jog along nicely. I have but a few coppers put by and the hundred francs pension going with the military medal.'

'Then, my dear old Caradoc, we may manage it,' chuckled Daubrac, joyfully rubbing his hands. 'Let me tell you it was a rich streak of luck for both of us that I passed in front of the Café du Helder this morning. We might have lived years in Paris without meeting. Now the Chamboulive property is in our bags.'

CHAPTER IX.

THE REJECTED SECOND.

JEAN CARADOC knew to a nicety the stratagems of Chinese pirates against whom he had fought in Tonkin, but not Parisian trickery.

Since youth he had lived from day to day without any heed of the future, not even so little ahead as the following day, and, after all the *peripetia* of his eventful career, he remained on many points as simple and credulous as a child. Women were all he distrusted.

He did not ask himself whether Daubrac might not only be aiming to get a slice out of the Chamboulive cake for himself. It was enough that he had known Daubrac in the Oran Spahi regiment, where he passed for a good fellow. He never troubled himself as to what he had done since then, and was in no way astonished to meet him metamorphosed into a man of business on the asphalte of the Boulevard des Italiens.

Besides, Charles Daubrac looked the man of mark. He was a little dark man, but neither too small nor too dark, gifted with an expressive and intelligent countenance, speaking well, superior in manners, and clothed with a correct elegance which prejudiced one in his favour. He was blithe, amiable and winning. Such characters abound in Paris; their gladsome appearance and careless ease often hiding an iron will, and a cunning to be dreaded. These Parisians of the decadence have but one aim, the conquest of money. They mount to the assault of fortune's castle with a never wearied perseverance, and unequalled audacity. They go straight onward like the wild boar through underwood, crushing down anybody in the way, and no more thinking of those they overthrow than of the obstacles they have to vanquish. They only capitulate with their conscience, and treat as subjugated slaves such of their contemporaries as are less bold or less lucky. But they attend to forms, and their avidity for gain does not make them too many enemies. Women of Coralie's class are enchanted with these pirates of the Parisian prairies.

Our good Bask-in-the-Sun had never frequented this world, and all he saw in Daubrac was an old fellow-trooper, sent by Providence to help him become a millionaire. It appeared quite natural to him to give this precious auxiliary a share in the windfall which he did not yet possess, but never doubted he would, and he associated himself heartily with the hopes of the friend who fell from the skies.

'My dear fellow,' he said, 'you are right. I am in luck to meet you, and I wish it will benefit both of us. I am not very jolly about the result, but I begin to believe that success is not impossible, and, come what may, I declare at once that my uncle's inheritance would have slipped by me but for you. But the pair of us may get it. Union is strength.'

'A motto engraved on the Belgian one-hundred sou pieces,' added the ever-facetious Daubrac.

'I count on our often seeing each other. I am living close here, in the Rue de la Michodiére, at the Hotel de la Providence—a name of good augury.'

'And I at No. 17, Rue Rougemont. We shall see each other every day, and, perchance, I shall have news to tell you on the morrow. Since I have fallen into row with you again, I shall keep you knee to knee. You must do me the pleasure of breakfasting with me over there, across the road, at the corner of the Chausée d'Antin, Bignon's Restaurant.'

'My dear friend, nothing would suit me better;

but I must be at the Grand Hotel at twelve, and it is a quarter to. How time flies!'

'To the Grand Hotel! But I just told you you would get no information there.'

'It's not to ask it I am going there, but to keep an appointment with my old captain, M. de Parentis. You did not know him—he was not in Africa in your time.'

'No, I do not remember any such name; but he will not keep you all day long, and I can wait here for you. When you get through we'll have breakfast.'

'Impossible, old fellow. He invited me yesterday, and I have a long string of news for him to-day. He has challenged a member of his club, and I am his second.'

'A duel! That ought to suit you. You went out more than once in the six months I passed in your troop.'

'That's true; and it seems to me that you did not flinch from refreshment by blood-letting. I was your backer, and you stood up under the steel like a trump.'

'Oh, I do not shirk — even now I am a civilian.'

'I believe so. But what worries me so is that the captain charged me to find a comrade. I came to this café to do it, hoping to meet a friend, a lieutenant, who drops in every morning, but I've drawn blank this time. I do not complain, because I have met you; but I am nonplussed, all the same, and I do not know what I shall say to my captain.'

'What's the rub? Don't he know anybody in town—a member of a club?'

'He could find a dozen supporters; but, d'ye see, the fight's about a woman.'

'Ah! Didn't I tell you there's a woman at the bottom of everything?'

'And he does not want to let gentlemen of his acquaintance into his confidence. That is why he applied to me, and asked me to find an old trooper of my kidney, who would not ask any explanations on the cause of the duel.'

'All serene! I am your man.'

'You, dear friend?'

'Why not? I will do the business as well as your absentee lieutenant.'

'I do not doubt it, old fellow, but the deuce of it is that my captain wants a soldier.'

'I am not one now, but I was. It amounts to the same thing.'

'That is so,' muttered Corporal Bask-in-the-Sun, reflecting.

'If, as I think, his adversary's seconds are swells, they will prefer arranging with a man like me than with an old tough blade recently back from Tonkin—for I imagine your lieutenant has been out in Tonkin?'

'It is true he is rather an uncultivated bear, and—anyway, he is not at the call—and hang me if I know where to find him!'

'It is twelve, and you have no time to look him up, or any other. Come, come, Caradoc, settle for the liquors, since you stood treat, and let us march off to the Grand at the double quick. You shall present me to the captain, and you will see he will thank you.'

'Upon my faith, you are right! Forward it is!'

Our excellent Bask-in-the-Sun never wondered if M. de Parentis would accede to the substitution, or bethought him that the highest nobleman may very properly be supported by a soldier in active service, on the field of honour, and yet no gentleman can go out under the wing of a stranger-civilian, whose antecedents and profession are not known by him.

The ex-spahi settled the bill, and proceeded towards the Grand Hotel, flanked by his new-found friend, who was enchanted with his morning's work.

To oblige Caradoc, who was, peradventure, going to enrich him by a million, was a piece of good fortune for a man like Daubrac, who never lost sight of his interest. And he was not sorry, either, of being agreeable to an officer who was member of a fashionable club. There is always some gain in serving men of high social position. Hence Daubrac was in joyous humour, as he showed, for he never ceased to jest during the short walk between the Helder and the Grand.

'Agree that Chamboulive was jolly well right in making merry in his old days,' said he, laughing.

'If he had been virtuous, he would still be alive, for he was built to last a hundred years, and you would never see his money. Happily the daughters of Venus killed him. I will lay heavy that he had been playing Sardanapulus the night before his fatal stroke. Decidedly the girls are good for something on condition they do not devour the present company. Luckily, there's no danger of their having eaten up all your uncle's coin! Without them, old men would live on indefinitely, fortunes would accumulate in a few hands, and social life would stop short.'

'That does not prevent my abominating them,' said Caradoc emphatically.

'You don't say so! Have you any cause of complaint against them?'

'Never mind! I know what I mean,' growled Grippe-Soleil, thinking of his captain's new infatuation, and classing poor Thérèse pitilessly among the dangerous class of females.

Daubrac became silent, and the conversation did not spring up again before they reached the Grand Hotel, where they were told at the office that M. de Parentis was in his rooms. He was lodged on the third floor in three rooms, which cost him a pretty penny. He came to open his door himself, and Bask-in-the-Sun introduced Charles Daubrac as once a Spahi, to avoid telling the truth of Daubrac having only been a trooper of the second-class—in other words, of a lower grade than Caradoc, who had never won the woollen stripes.

The captain greeted them heartily, told them that his adversary's friends had just arrived, and asked them to be seated whilst he finished a preliminary parley with those gentlemen. To which Daubrac politely responded that he was wholly at M. de Parentis' disposal, although he had not the honour of his acquaintance.

Daubrac would have been still more flattered if he had known that one of the seconds with whom M. de Parentis was about to place him in contact was General the Marquis de Chèvreville, whom he knew by name and reputation. He passed for very rich, and exercised some authority in his club.

Full of consideration for personages of degree, Daubrac would have greatly felicitated himself on meeting this chance, thanks to the old Spahi, of entering into relations with one of such importance; but he would have been less satisfied had he known the name of Viscount de Chavigny's other second.

These two were conferring with the captain in the next room, and the general was speaking at this moment.

'My dear Parentis,' he said, 'I have accepted the task confided to me by Chavigny in the hope of arranging the affair. It is agreed between us that I am to retire if I do not succeed. I was your father's friend; you are an officer, and though you do not serve in that arm where I did, I cannot be a second against you. So I come, not to regulate the mode of the meeting, but to bear you proposals of peace.'

'Has M. de Chavigny charged you to offer an apology?' coldly inquired the captain.

'Apology!—for what! Come, come, my dear boy, I was by when this nonsensical altercation arose, and I declare that Chavigny said nothing to wound you. He spoke severely of women on the stage, as people do pretty well everywhere—even at Tonkin, I wager; and you must have heard a lot of such stuff. Why did you get angry?'

'Because M. de Chavigny's tone irritated me.'

'We cannot call that a reason. You very well know that the good fellowship at a club dinner authorises some freedom of speech; and, in any case, Chavigny did not step outside the limits allowed between men of the same set. But, all of a sudden, you took offence—with a violence which much astonished me, you must allow me to say. You did provoke him, that's incontestable.'

'I agree, general.'

'Well, since you admit it, you ought to understand that you should withdraw your provocation, which nothing justifies, I maintain. On his part, Chavigny, when you do that, will declare right willingly that he had no intention of offending you—and that ends the matter.'

'General, things pass thus in Parliament. The members exchange insults, and, as they have no desire to fight, make excuses in the newspapers, and that settles it. I am not a member of Parliament, but a soldier, and I am not so easily contented.'

'There is never any dishonour in expressing regret for having given way to a hasty impulse; and it is precisely because you are a soldier that you can show yourself conciliatory. When a man has such proofs of service as you, my dear Parentis, he has no fear of being suspected to lack in bravery. You have shown your quality in war; and, besides, I know, gone out on the field often enough. One more duel will add nothing to your well-established reputation for valour, and—touchiness,' added the Marquis de Chèvreville, smiling. 'So, avoid a useless encounter—I ask you in the name of the friendship which united me to your father.'

This speech, full of wisdom, ought to have swayed the hearer; but it produced the contrary effect. Like all in the wrong, the captain suffered dreadfully when it was demonstrated to him, and, furthermore, it sovereignly displeased him to be lectured in this style before the viscount's other second, a young fopling of the first water.

'General,' he said curtly, 'I thank you for your excellent intentions and good advice; but you must permit me to follow my own impulses on this occasion. I have nothing to withdraw in what I said. My adversary is free to be satisfied with this my answer—which I hope you gentlemen will kindly transmit to him. If he be not satisfied, I am at his orders.'

'How can he be satisfied when you refuse any reparation but sword in hand?'

'That is better than all others.'

'I do not think so; but since you hold to it, my mission is terminated, and I take leave of you. Chavigny will have to find somebody to replace me.'

'Quite so; but since this gentleman has taken the trouble to come, nothing prevents his staying in order to settle immediately with my two friends here the time and conditions of the meeting.'

The viscount's second nodded in token of assent.

'What a Hotspur you are!' exclaimed the general to Parentis. 'If any harm befall you, I wash my hands of it; and this justice will be rendered me, that I did all I could to prevent a stupid duel. However, as it delights you to fight without rhyme or reason, fight away, my dear boy. I am not going to stand by at the meeting—I have told you why. But I can witness the preliminaries, if only to oppose extraordinary arrangements—I suspect some from you! You are a man to propose pistols at five paces!'

'I have given my seconds instructions to accept everything M. de Chavigny demands.'

'Well, usher in your seconds, and let's have done. I know that it is not the custom to regulate the terms in presence of one of the principals; but you must desire as much as I to terminate this affair as soon as possible, and it is useless to lose our time in going to and fro.'

'As you please, general,' returned Octave de

Parentis, opening the door separating the two rooms of the flat.

Caradoc and Daubrac were waiting on the threshold, erect, stiff, and stern, like soldiers at the 'carrying arms.' They came forward at the captain's call, and were introduced, one after the other—Caradoc the first.

Upon the statement of their names and military standing, General de Chèvreville did not start, but the other friend of the Viscount de Chavigny scanned them with singular persistency—and it was not Grippe-Soleil whom he most hardly eyed.

This surprised Parentis, who fancied that his old corporal had committed some solecism in deportment; but no! Jean was correctly apparelled and his attitude was as faultless as his costume. As for Daubrac, he had the air and manners of a perfect gentleman. The captain, therefore, understood nothing of the second's conduct, and the general himself appeared astonished.

This second was a young man, a celebrity in the world where people only live for amusement, a Baron de Teilleul, whose nobility did not date from the Crusades, but who squandered considerable money. He was closely intimate with Savinien de Coulibœuf, and had aided him on the evening before to 'raise that racket' at the music-hall.

Less patient than ever, Parentis was going to demand an explanation of his disdainful silence, when, glancing at Daubrac, he perceived that he looked rather disconcerted.

'I fancy, monsieur, that I have seen you in another place,' observed Baron de Teilleul loftily.

'Possibly,' Daubrac laconically rejoined, trying to face him out.

'You came to me some months ago from a party in the Rue Milton, by the name of—his name escapes me, though I have solid reason to remember it. Pray help me out.'

'Pardon me, monsieur, I have not come here to aid your memory, but to——'

'You very well know to whom I allude—the honourable money-dealer who has capital at command, and charges you to find good investments. Though you may not remember his name, at least you will remember that he lent me thirty thousand francs, at thirty per cent.'

'What's this to me?' queried Daubrac saucily.

'Nothing, clearly. Still you must own me right in declining the favour to treat with you about the duel of which my friend, the Viscount de Chavigny, charged me to arrange the order. When I accepted this mission I could not foresee that M. de Parentis would select you for his representative. Now, I must retire. You will excuse me, eh, general?'

'I am retiring with you,' exclaimed Chèvreville. 'Chavigny will see what has to be done. I have had enough of committing myself to adventures of this sort. Good-bye, captain.'

Upon these last words, equivalent to a rupture of friendly relations, the general angrily pulled his beaver down on his bald head, and stormed out at the same time as the Baron de Teilleul.

Octave de Parentis was still more furious than his father's old friend. He had only partly understood the incident, but he fully did that the gentlemen cut him dead because of the unworthiness of one of his seconds, and he was not in the mood to remain quiet under the sting of the affront. He let them go because he was not able to retort upon them, but he wheeled round upon Daubrac like a wild boar on the hunter who has wounded him in the rear.

'Tell me what this means?' he challenged him, looking him in the eye. 'And, first, who are you?'

'You know,' muttered Daubrac. 'Caradoc presented me.'

'Caradoc told me your name, which gave me no information. He did add that you had served——'

'In the Oran Spahis, yes, monsieur.'

'For the honour of the army, I prefer not to believe it.'

'It's the truth, though, captain,' exclaimed Grippe-Soleil. 'He was in my command.'

'Hold your tongue! I am not addressing you. It is to him I speak, and I await an answer.'

'What the deuce do you want me to answer?' returned Daubrac, shrugging his shoulders, and not to be daunted by so little. 'I did not know you an hour ago, when I met my old comrade Caradoc at the Café du Helder. He told me he was looking after a second for a friend of his. Naturally I offered myself.'

'You advised me, captain, to try and find an old soldier,' put in Bask-in-the-Sun supportingly.

'I did not tell you to bring me a bill-discounter's tout,' interrupted the officer bluntly.

'Monsieur,' went on Daubrac, without wincing, 'I intend to support any roughness from you, for I appreciate your vexation, but you must let me explain. You have applied to me a wounding epithet which I do not deserve, as I shall prove to you.'

'You should have said that to M. de Teilleul.'

'He did not give me time; but I shall find him! At present I am addressing you, and I beg you to hear me out. The truth is, I am in a financial business, a very open calling when carried on honourably, as I flatter myself is done in my case. My reputation is made, and is an excellent one; you need only ask anybody for assurance of that.'

'Your reputation is not in question.'

'Pardon me, monsieur, it is! Before everything else, it is on my heart to justify myself unto you, and you cannot refuse to hear me. Therefore I tell you I am in business. Amongst other operations, I get bills done. I serve as agent between the capitalist and the borrower, for a moderate commission, and I do not fix the terms of the loan. My part is limited to bringing the two principals together. In this way, last winter, M. du Teilleul had resource to my good offices. I sent him to a money-lender of my acquaintance, and they concluded a bargain. At what price I never knew, and it may have been usurious, although thirty per cent. is a trifle to what some securities can obtain. It is probable that M. de Teilleul, although a baron, offered very dubious guarantees. For my remuneration I touched three per cent. on the amount of the loan, or thirty thousand francs. The regular agents do not charge their customers anything less. Now, is this petty noble justified in calling me a usurer's pilot-fish? You may think what you please, but I do not consider we are even, and he must give me satisfaction for the insult done me. I have had the honour to wear a soldier's coat, and count myself worth a ruined baron. If he refuses to apologise as he ought, I will slap his face in public—force him to fight. And I will have no difficulty in finding seconds to whom he cannot object. This being said, monsieur, I have only to express the regret I feel at having been the quite involuntary cause of an occurrence disagreeable to you.'

This rather clever speech made some impression upon Parentis's fickle mind. He could not hide from himself that the primary wrong lay in his having had the strange whim to choose Corporal Bask-in-the-Sun as second, and the stranger one still to send him out on the highway to pick up another. As for Daubrac's justification, the captain did not know enough to disbelieve in it. Never having anything to do with usurers, and poorly conversant with the underworld of Paris, our soldier was not in a state to value the soundness of Charles Daubrac's plea, and he was in no spirit to inquire of his references, as they say in business. He only saw that he had made a blunder in giving Caradoc *carte blanche*, and, in blindly accepting this equivocal Daubrac's support, he had put himself in an awkward position in the eyes of his equals. He also saw that the damage done was almost irreparable, and that, perchance, he could not redeem himself in the opinion of his set by finding another pair of friends, whom the Viscount de Chavigny would almost have the right of refusing without examination, after what had happened with the former. What would be the good of rebuffing Bask-in-the-Sun as he had Daubrac? The former believed he had nothing to reproach himself for, as he had not been educated in the same school as his superior.

All men are born equal, and it is education gives them different sentiments.

Octave de Parentis felt indignant at being put in contact with a person practising a villainous craft, but Jean Caradoc was not shocked to learn that Daubrac had a hand in shady negotiations, and he was not repugnant to inheriting from his uncle Chamboulive, enriched by all sorts of illicit speculations. Although an honest fellow in his own way, Bask-in-the-Sun did not appreciate delicacies. He would not have lent money at ruinous rates, but he was not afflicted at his uncle having so done, with profit, and he saw nothing reprehensible in his old comrade in the Oran Spahis aiding his uncle by guiding borrowers to him. He had so little consciousness of Daubrac being shameful that he undertook to defend him.

'Upon my word, captain,' he exclaimed, 'I think these gentlemen are too particular. I don't mind the general, for it may vex him to have you set up the rank and file against a man commanding a division; but the other! a sprig that I could put in my pocket! He wants a sound whipping, and I am willing to give him one!'

'Just you do me the pleasure of keeping yourself quiet,' responded Parentis. 'I forbid you meddling with my affairs after this.'

'What! forbid me hunting up Baroda?'

'I wish he were at the devil!'

'All right—enough's said, captain. I shall no longer bother about that vile ape! I was going to find him, although I missed him last evening; but, since you do not care a fig about him, I give it up. Only—allow me to tell you one bit of good news—good for me, I mean. I hope you do not bear me ill-will, and that it will interest you all the same.'

'Let's hear it quickly.'

'Well, captain, my friend Daubrac, here present, knew my uncle greatly, and also where to look for the property, which is quite what the newspapers stated—four millions, if not more!'

'So much the better for you! I wish your handling the cash as soon as possible, and I ask you never to speak to me again about it.'

This was said in such a tone that poor Grippe-Soleil changed countenance.

'Am I to understand that you dismiss me?' he sadly inquired.

There were tears in his eyes, and, seeing this, Parentis had not the courage to answer him 'Yes,' although so prompted by his feelings, for he had not yet swallowed the check received—a little by Caradoc's fault.

'Oh, no!' he said abruptly. 'I was glad to see you, and I shall continue to welcome you as long as we both stay in Paris; but, for heaven's sake! do not show any more zeal! Thinking to do me a service, you have put me into a hole this morning out of which I do not know how to step. I dare say you would play me some more such tricks, with the best intentions in the world, so I entreat you to devote yourself entirely to the pursuit of the fortune, and leave the rest to others.'

'You mean Baroda?'

'You understand me clearly, and I need not speak more plainly here. Enough that you know my ideas have changed. I came to France to amuse myself, and, as soon as I get through this duel, so badly begun, I shall lead the devil's own life!'

'We say now "Go the pace!"' rectified Daubrac, who had lost none of his coolness.

Parentis glanced at him askance, but went on to Bask-in-the-Sun :

'This is why, my dear Caradoc, you will do me the pleasure to forget all that happened yesterday.'

'I ask nothing else, captain ; and it's easy, for you know what I think of women.'

'No comments, please. You can always find me, if you want me ; but, this morning, I am not breakfasting at home, for I have to procure other seconds, and I have no time to lose. As for you, monsieur, I have nothing to say to you ; your concerns do not in any way concern mine, and here our connection ought to end.'

'I acknowledge that, monsieur, and I regret it,' replied Daubrac, ever imperturbable, as he made for the door.

Bask-in-the-Sun was also on that road when his superior, in showing him out, silently grasped his hand, and that sent him away at ease.

'May thunderbolts crush them all!' hissed Parentis, when alone ; 'ay, all of them! including this Thérèse, with whom I am madly in love. She is the cause of it all. Here I am obliged to kill this Chavigny, if I care about not remaining covered with ridicule. His friend De Teilleul will hawk it about everywhere that I had to select a tainted sheep for my second ; and the general will not belie him. I will kill De Teilleul to boot! But I will never more see this widow, who goes on the night of her husband's death to get an engagement at a music-hall.'

CHAPTER X.

AT THE MUSIC-HALL DOOR.

SIX days after her bereavement, Thérèse Tercier had not quitted her flat in the Boulevard Beaumarchais. She had not even cancelled the notice given anterior to her marriage to her landlord, and had provided herself with a maid-of-all-work from being more than ever resolved to live quietly, although in a way to attain ample ease. She had engaged for the Ambassadeurs' Music-hall on splendid terms, and did not suspect that she owed the prize to the noisy extravagances of a few coxcombs. However, she might have obtained, without them, these unusual conditions after being heard, as her voice had much improved in a twelvemonth, and the management might rely on a brilliant success.

It was not without pain that she had determined to essay thus quickly the course so successful to her and so shocking to Octave de Parentis. Before taking the step, she had long reflected, and concluded that her father-in-law's odious behaviour authorized reprisal. He had driven her away, insulted her, and calumniated her. He did not merit her losing a reappearance on the stage, for fear of displeasing him, whether or not the same where she had been seen and loved by the unfortunate Jacques Bonhomme, whom she had never loved.

A less energetic and more timorous woman would have hesitated; Thérèse had promptly and manfully taken her course. Her spirit, tempered by misfortune, was so made that she never was influenced by the opinion of the world, and endeavoured solely to please her conscience. That reproached her for nothing. She had kept the pledge given her mother, and the demise of her husband left her free. How mattered it to her what was said about her return to the music-hall? She had signified her intention to the captain, who appeared to relish her arguments.

During the five days' rehearsing for the fresh début on the Saturday following, the Bonhomme family showed no signs of life, and no incident ruffled the first phase of her new existence. She never thought at all of that Singalese whom Bask-in-the-Sun accused of cherishing black designs against her. Hence all was going on according to her heart's desire, and she regretted nothing—save the not seeing Octave de Parentis.

She had promised to receive his calls as soon as engaged; and that having happened on the evening of their first interview, she had written him next day. Yet he had not merely not come, but he had not even written a reply.

She knew not what to think of his silence, for she could not divine that on the day of her writing the captain was fighting a duel on her behalf, and that a sword-thrust through his right wrist placed him in the impossibility of going out or writing. He had found other seconds whom M. de Chavigny had accepted, and the two met at nine in the morning at Le Vésinet. Kept abed by fever, and less cured of his suspicions than of his wound, the captain could send nobody in his stead, for he no longer confided even in Grippe-Soleil, whom he had seen after the duel, for he called every day to ask about him.

Again, the ex-corporal would not willingly have taken upon himself to go and pacify Thérèse, for, after the affair of honour, he held her in horror. He would never forgive her for being the cause of a meeting in which an army officer had been defeated by a civilian ; and, if he had dared, he would have regaled the patient on each call with his theories on the wickedness of Eve's daughters. But he dared not ; and Parentis took heed not to speak to him of the bewidowed woman of the Jardin d'Acclimatation, for he would have had to admit that the viscount and his associates were right in treating her as they did, inasmuch as she was going again to mount on the boards of 'the sing-song' where she had already paraded her voice.

Hence Parentis was compelled to champ his bit and pursue his brown studies, for now he doubted her with whom he had so suddenly and violently fallen in love. The faith he had felt was felt no more. Yet he fretted to be afoot, to go and ask an explanation decisive for Thérèse ; and he did not forget that the stage-manager of the Ambassadeurs' had announced the reappearance of Signorita Teresa on the following Saturday.

He longed to see her before she thus burned her vessels, and the doctor in charge of him would not promise to let him go out before a week. He had himself promised not to break orders, to his utmost power; but he was incapable of budging, any way, and he cursed the fate condemning him to inaction at the very juncture when he had more need than ever to be free of movement.

Thérèse was ignorant of all this, and she began to murmur to herself that the dashing captain had only been flirting with her. She regretted having taken his declarations seriously, and, above all, letting him see they touched her. This was a more cruel deception than the many endured since her mother's death; and she sought consolation in vowing it should be the last, for she made up her mind never more to listen to man, and to entirely consecrate herself to art. Thus she collected herself, and concentrated her whole will upon one sole end—to succeed on the lyric stage. The triumphs predicted to her at the Ambassadeurs' ought to facilitate access to a loftier height, for the music-halls are feeders to the opera-bouffe, and even opera-comique theatres; but she had to deserve such triumphs. To obtain them is more difficult than to deserve them, for the music-hall audience are more unstable than water, and the very crowd who roared to have her again, might hoot her when she did come out.

Thérèse did not meditate without disquietude on this Saturday evening which would settle her future. She did not conceal from herself that she would be at the mercy of the variable moods agitating the open-air audience. They are hostile or enthusiastic, without anybody knowing why. The temperature may have something to do with it. When it is cold or it rains, a man is in ill-humour—and fine evenings are rare in September. The interruptions must be reckoned in, as is said in law courts. Half-a-dozen tipsy, hired or accidental brawlers, suffice to disturb a performance. There are cabals also, and poor Thérèse had enemies to fear of more than one sort.

In the first place, the 'mashers'—regular comers to the restaurant terrace—were very likely to turn against her, after what happened at the club and on the duelling-ground of Le Vésinet. She did not fear them, because she knew nothing of the quarrel and the duel of which she was so involuntarily the cause; but she reasoned that her unfortunate husband's friends might bear a grudge against her, and be struck with the idea of coming to avenge Joseph Bonhomme by vigorously hissing his too speedily consoled widow.

But she resolved to brave all these dangers, and, in any event, she could not well revoke a signed engagement.

She certainly would have preferred to reappear anywhere else, and she would have left town to sing in the country, or abroad, since she had no news of her champion; but, unfortunately, her notoriety had not yet gone beyond the Champs Elysées, and foreign managers on the hunt for talent do not go there after unknown stars. So she resigned herself to enter by the lower door into that artistic temple in the dome of which a woman sometimes finds fame and fortune.

She neglected nothing in the way of preparation, putting herself in the hands of a singing master, professor at the Conservatoire, whose lessons she had given up to obey the injunctions of M. Bonhomme, senior, who abhorred music. Moreover, she went twice a day to run through her songs with her orchestral leader, who thought a great deal of her ability, and put all his zeal in facilitating the new test. A ballad is very little in comparison with a singing part in an opera, or even an operetta; but still it may be well done, and may show one has a superior talent. Thérèse strove for this, and seemed fated to succeed, as she was gifted.

Resolved to live economically, in order to be obliged to no one, she used regularly to take the omnibus from her door to the Madeleine, whence she went by transfer to another to the Place de la Concorde, and went home by the same cheap conveyance. As she did this trip in the afternoon, she ran no chance of meeting her music-hall sisters of the previous season, ladies who employ their day not in studying vocalism. She was in no hurry to do so, for she was aware of their not wishing her well. They regarded her as an intruder—an 'outsider'—were jealous and hated her, principally because she was well-behaved. Her marriage had piqued them ; her return enraged them.

The artistes of the sterner sex were not better disposed towards her. From that quarter, too, she was bound to expect hostility, probably to be manifested by some evil turn.

Of all the company the one who most detested poor Thérèse was that Coralie, whom Daubrac had cited to Bask-in-the-Sun as one of Uncle Chamboulive's sultanas. With good reason she styled herself a 'light' soprano. She never could endure any rival on the stage or the town, and Thérèse's beauty still more exasperated than her talent. In the preceding year, Coralie, who disdained nobody's tribute, had cast her nets out for Joseph Bonhomme, wishful to bleed him as she had Chamboulive. She had no intentions of marrying the man, but she knew he would be rich hereafter, and she hoped to anticipate his future income in her favour ; in this she made an error, for our honest Joseph was not a spendthrift any more than his miserly progenitor. But Coralie had not forgiven Thérèse having 'cut her out' for an honourable end, and, upon learning that she was going to come back to the Ambassadeurs', she went and had a 'flare-up' with the manager. He tolerated her on account of the numerous gallants—'string of fellows,' the philosophical Daubrac would say—

whom her spicy songs and easy manners attracted to the place.

On the eve of her reappearance, Thérèse, going out to rehearse, met this creature whom she despised, for the first time since a year. There is no trouble in divining that it was an encounter agreeable to neither. Coralie was chatting before the stage-door with the café-concert flower-woman, settling a bill of hers, indeed, for the throwing of a number of bouquets at her during the following night's performance, as soon as Coralie sang 'My lovely Creole!' She purchased her tribute beforehand, and, peradventure, by the same medium, was paying to prepare a failure for her rival. Whichever way it was, the bargain was concluded, for she fled as soon as she spied Thérèse, darting anything but a tender glance at her, and disappearing behind a clump of verdure.

Thérèse was going on her road when the nosegay-vendor came up to her with a grin on her face, and she dared not avoid her, for she knew her position, and did not want to add to her enemies. This flower-seller ate from any hand, and graduated her greetings according to the gain the artistes obtained her. Now, Thérèse had helped her to earn considerably, and she no doubt hoped to make it more.

'Oh, mademoiselle, how glad I am to see you once more!' she cried on nearing her. 'And I am not the only one. Everybody loves you here.'

'Including Coralie?' retorted the vocalist ironically.

'Well, not her, by exception! But it is clear why. She was applauded all the year, but now no one will get a hand but you. I predict you a stunning hit! I said as much to Coralie, and it roughed her up a bit I can tell you!'

'Oh, I have nothing against her, and as long as I succeed——'

'You would not be uneasy if you had been in the house last Saturday. There was nothing to be heard but your name, and it was not the common people that called for Teresa, neither—all the Jockey Club were here and shouting! Whew, you ought to have heard 'em!'

'That is singular. I do not know any member of the Jockey Club.'

'They know you very well, mademoiselle, that they do, and they will come in a body to-morrow. Oh, it will be a swell night!'

'Can you be speaking true?'

'Believe me, I know what I am talking about; and I answer for it, that, if you like, your fortune is made. I said so, Saturday, to a gentleman who was speaking to me about you.'

'What gentleman? Who would inquire about me?'

'An awful swell—and wearing the ribbon of the Legion of Honour, too!'

'Beribboned, eh?' muttered Thérèse, instantly thinking of Parentis.

'Yes, mademoiselle; and I really believe he is an officer in the army. He is dreadful sweet upon you, for he put a quantity of questions to me. Why you left us, and if you were coming back. I fancy I saw him here last year, and so he may have been off to the wars before he could get to speak to you. Only to think you were here, in the manager's room, whilst I was talking with him! If I had only known! But I never dreamt of it! When the manager came out to say you were engaged I ran round to the stage-door, but you were already gone, and so the gentleman went away, too. But he will be here to-morrow, you may depend upon it.'

'I do not care to see him, and I shall be obliged to you if you do not speak of me to him.'

'As you please, mademoiselle; but you cannot be cross if he buys some flowers, and sends them round to you, eh? He is so generous! He gave me a louis just for answering two or three questions —quite innocent ones!'

'I shall accept nothing from him—or anyone else.'

'Well, perhaps you are right—for men, I always say, are like dogs—the higher you hold the stick, the better they jump. Anyway, what do I want? My little trade to flourish—and it will, I warrant you. As a proof, look here! Not ten minutes ago another gentleman came along—not such a swell as t'other of Saturday, and not young, but some style about him, nevertheless, who also wanted to know, don't you know——'

'Something about me?'

'Yes, indeed, mademoiselle. Only I believe

Number Two is not like the other. To begin with, he is too old for love-making—I know well that age hasn't much to do with it—but it's not my idea that he pretends to be a "mash" upon the ladies. Besides, he does not know you at all, for he asked me what like you are—fair or dark, tall or short—if you had not left the music-hall in order to marry, and if you were coming back now you were a widow!'

'What did you answer him?'

'Upon my faith! I mistrusted the man; I went so far as to imagine he was a detective police-officer; and I made out that I knew nothing. He gave me a hundred sous all the same; and I believe that I mistook him for what he wasn't; for he had a private carriage waiting for him in Gabriel Avenue—the police do not use carriages! But, stop a bit! as a proof he was not trying to pay his court to you—I told him you were on the stage rehearsing, and would be coming out soon—well, instead of hanging about the door for you, off he dashed—so quickly that Coralie did not see him, though she came up just as he went away.'

By this Thérèse had had enough of the bouquet-seller's babble, and she was eager to be off, only too happy at having failed to meet the man who had never seen her, and yet was so interested in her. She abstained from telling the flower-woman what she thought of her trade, and proceeded towards the omnibus-station by the opening of the Cours-la-Reine.

As she went through the groves of trees to reach the river-side, she mused over the conversation shared with the woman, but did not manage to disentangle all the truth.

The gentleman with the decoration was Octave de Parentis—Thérèse did not doubt that. What had he come to the Ambassadeurs' for, only a few hours after they had exchanged promises equivalent to vows? Was it the desire to be better informed about her which led him? No; since she had kept back her having sung there during one whole season. She had spoken of returning to the stage without designating the particular house where she hoped to be engaged. Therefore, chance alone had guided M. de Parentis to that music-hall.

It was a disenchantment to find him spending his evening in such a place instead of at home. She had pictured him fleeing distraction and shutting himself up to muse on his love, which, to believe him, entirely absorbed him. And here she suddenly learnt that this chivalric officer was a man like any other—chiefly engrossed about pleasure.

Thérèse forgot how she herself, instead of staying indoors after an interview which perchance would decide her life, had gone out to the Champs Elysées after an engagement.

But this disillusion was nothing beside the chagrin caused her by Parentis' stooping to interrogate a flower-woman about the past life of one to whom he had sworn eternal love. What material was this captain made of, who had vaunted of suffering the influence of that lightning stroke known as love at first sight? Had he taken Thérèse for one of those passing conquests who are cast off and forgotten when the garrison is changed? She was the more strongly tempted to believe it as she had not seen the captain since the fatal evening, and disgust curled her lips at the thought of having been deceived to this extent. The feeling of the humiliation he inflicted soared over all the others.

Oh, for the gift of second-sight!

Then would she have seen the valiant soldier stretched on his bed of pain from the effects of the sword-thrust received for her sake, and suffering all an impatient lover can suffer when condemned to inaction and uncertainty. She would have ceased accusing him, and not hesitated a moment ere running to the Grand Hotel.

But it was decreed that a misunderstanding should drive both to desperation.

While she recognised Parentis by the flower-woman's description of the military gentleman, she had not the least idea of who the man could be who inquired about her with so much solicitude as to be temporarily mistaken for a secret-police officer. She wondered if it were not some emissary of the Bonhomme family, come solely to make sure of her reappearance on the morrow, whereupon he could get up a demonstration against her, to break out at the proper psychological moment.

Thus she was thinking as she improved her pace, and so arrived at the kerb of the Grand Avenue roadway, when she fancied a man was walking after her. It was not certainty, but one of those vague impressions which warn us that somebody unseen is looking at us or hovering about.

CHAPTER XI.

A SPLENDID ENGAGEMENT.

NEVERTHELESS, Thérèse did not turn round. She was accustomed to these little annoyances, for she never went out without being pestered. All good-looking women are exposed to the lady-killers' insults in a large city where they abound.

Thérèse knew, through experience, that the best means to discourage the bores is to have no air of seeing them. In any event, she need not have to fear any overbold advances, as these nuisances select lonely spots for addressing a strange lady, and there was a throng here. It was the hour when in this season the promenaders, riders and takers of carriage exercise return from the Bois de Boulogne, and the road was as crowded with vehicles as the pathways with foot-passengers.

To reach the omnibus-office Thérèse had to cross the main road at the Place de la Concorde. There is a 'refuge' in the midst of the road for foot-passengers—and never was one more fitly placed, for, at this point, such is the vehicular traffic that, at some moments, the difficulty is great in finding space between the wheels and horses' heads to slip through. Rather than attempt the crossing, long circuits are made by the elderly, infirm, and nervous, as well as country folk, far from familiar with a 'jam' of vehicles.

But Thérèse had a light foot and clear glance. She soon found an opening, and without hindrance reached the stone islet separating the up and the down streams of movement. At five p.m. in September the uphill current to the Arc de Triomphe is much less strong, as the police regulations make the coachmen keep to the right. Hence to comers from the Avenue Gabriel the first half of the road is less dangerous to cross than the other. Thérése was consequently obliged to wait at the refuge for a fresh chance to glide among the vehicles. She was not alone, for others had preceded her, and were similarly awaiting a delayed opening.

The group was speedily reinforced by a gentleman who skilfully made the first passage and placed himself at the young lady's elbow. She lifted her eyes to the neighbour who pressed her so close, and saw he was a man of tolerable age, most suitably dressed, and as tall as a Yankee; his face was destitute of anything like beard, and its complexion was gingerbread.

She shrank away to avoid this contact, but the haven was too limited for much movement, to her keen vexation, for she noticed that the new-comer watched her with a persistent attention burdensome to her. All she could do was to turn her back on the undesirable companion, thinking that he would be at once rebuffed and not push his rudeness any farther.

She was wrong, for she heard him murmur after this self-introductory sentence :

'Beg your pardon, madame ! It is you, ain't it, who's going to come out to-morrow at the Ambassadeurs' Music-hall ?'

The tone was polite, the voice bland, with a marked foreign accent, and there was nothing offensive in the question. But Thérèse took good care not to reply, knowing the dangers of entering into conversation with a stranger, however innocently in appearance it began. A strict silence is the best defence a woman can oppose in such a case to the impertinent essays of a street Don Juan. But this was a tenacious fellow, and, instead of drawing off as beaten, he resumed, more gently and politely than before :

'I see, madame, that you mistake my intentions. I am not of the age to pay addresses to any pretty girl met in the streets, and I should not have presumed to accost you here if it were not on important business. I grant this is no proper place, but I hope you will overlook this when I tell you that I went to the Ambassadeurs' Music-hall expressly to have an interview with you. Now, I entreat you to allow me a few minutes' attention; not here, but—say under yonder trees—not a bad place for a chat. We shall not be alone,' added the man with a smile, evidently signifying: 'If I had any evil designs, I should not propose an audience in the open air before a multitude of people.'

Thérèse fell out of the clouds of her imagination. This odd person must be the one who questioned the bouquet-seller, and had ostensibly another aim than to prattle compliments to an artiste whom he had never seen, to judge by his inquiries of that woman. Without injuring her reputation, the singer could listen to him briefly. Yet she halted, from not being completely set at ease about this most respectful individual's intentions. But curiosity is a feminine failing from which she was not exempt, and she yearned to know what it all meant.

The flower-woman had supposed him to be a member of the Detective Department of Police, and Thérèse, recalling her unworthy father-in-law's menace, deemed him fully capable of denouncing her as having employed the serpent-charmer to relieve her of her husband. This accusation was unsupportable; and, in order to clear her mind, she meant to utilize this present occasion to explain once for all to this emissary of M. Jacques Bonhomme or of the police, as the case might be. If she had reflected a little, she would have understood that enemies would not have proceeded thus. They were not bound to be dainty towards her, and, were she so suspected, she would have been cited straightway to appear before the police official who had opened an inquiry after the event in the Jardin d'Acclimatation.

But Thérèse, perturbed by this fresh incident, was in no state to reason properly. And not aware that she had better have avoided than hearkened to this obstinate follower, she determined to trust to hazard ; quickly crossing the road, at the risk of being crushed, she said to herself, 'He will not dare do this, and so will lose sight of me ; but if he does succeed in overtaking me, I will compel him to explain himself.' She darted bravely into the thick of the vehicles, and was lucky enough to get across to the sidewalk without mishap ; then she walked swiftly towards the quay. But the man was not slow to come up with her underneath the trees, having managed as boldly and dexterously as she.

Faithful to her programme, Thérèse stopped short, faced round, and, looking him square in the eyes, said :

'Have done, monsieur. Who are you? and what do you want?'

The man opened proceedings by bowing to the ground, with his hat off, and replied as naturally as could be :

'Madame, my name is John Carholt, and, as this may not teach you anything, I hasten to add that I am the Paris correspondent and representative of the Alhambra Variety Theatre Company, of London.'

'May be so,' returned the lady curtly; 'but I do not care any more about that company than I do for yours. What do you want of me?'

'I am astonished, madame, at your not guessing it. Of course, I come to offer you an engagement.'

'From a theatre which does not know I exist? You are making a fool of me, monsieur!'

'No, no, madame; this is strictly business. The managing director of the Alhambra saw and heard you here last summer, at the end of the season. He was enthusiastic over your beauty and talent, and was going to profit by his passing through Paris to offer you personally a very handsome engagement, when he was suddenly called home for an important and most urgent matter. Shortly afterwards he wrote over to the management of the Ambassadeurs' Music Hall, but the answer was that you no longer belonged to their company, and they could not or would not give him your address; so he immediately instructed me to try to procure it. I tried, but have failed, and had to give it up. I confess I forgot all about the affair, except your name, when it happened I dropped in at the concert last Saturday, and heard you loudly called for by the audience. Next day I wrote to that effect to the Alhambra manager, who ordered me to engage you forthwith. But I did not have the assurance that the Teresa called for was yourself, and I have lost two or three days in inquiries. In short, I came out to the Champs

Elysées to-day, and questioned an attendant in the front of the house—a woman who sells flowers, I believe—who assured me that the object of my search was the same charming performer who had made such a hit last year. Unfortunately, she could not tell me where you lived; and I cannot in fairness apply to the stage-doorkeeper, who would refuse a theatrical agent any address, or the manager, who would see I was trying to win away his leading vocalist. I was going away very much disappointed, when on my road to my carriage I perceived you speaking with the woman I had just left. I recognised you by the portrait my London friend drew of you, and by the place where you stood. I might have gone straight up to you,' continued the elderly gentleman; 'but, for the reason lately given you, I preferred not to be seen addressing you by any employé of the establishment. Pray excuse the liberty I have taken, madame, and the long speech which you have had the patience to hear out to the end. I thank you, for I was bound to explain my conduct before talking over the business.'

Thérèse had not recovered from hearing this man speak in such a style. The tone was simple, the language clear, and it was difficult to suspect this so-called agent of the Alhambra, of London, of treachery, although she could not but pick out some odd flaws in the story. For instance, she might have challenged the reason why this English resident in Paris could not obtain an address of which she had never made a mystery; by what prodigy of memory he had recalled the name of Teresa after a year's time; and, lastly, why he had waited several days before trying to see her, instead of sending a letter to her at the music-hall, enclosing the manager's proposal. But she was still under the spell of deep astonishment caused her by overtures most unexpected, and much too tardy. Made a little sooner, she would at least have considered them; whilst now she was bound by an engagement.

Thérèse was honest, and she never broke her plighted word, as her marriage proved; so she was fully decided to refuse—and yet, through lingering distrust, she wanted to enjoy the pleasure of offering objections. This suggesting of business arrangements under the trees of the Champs Elysées seemed so queer to her that she had some difficulty in treating it seriously, and she sought to confound the negotiator by putting embarrassing questions.

'Monsieur,' she said, 'I am as flattered as can be by having been noticed last year by the manager of the Alhambra; but you will oblige by showing me how I would be any advantage to his theatre.'

'You would be an immense success!' exclaimed Mr. John Carholt, as he had given himself out to be named.

'Excuse me; I do not know a word of English.'

'You will sing in French.'

'The audience would not understand me.'

'You do not know the Alhambra. It is situated in a part of London so full of foreigners that it has been called "La Petite France"—Little France; besides, foreign cooks, valets, servants, couriers, like an entertainment consisting principally of show and pantomime. And as for the native portion of the audience, its not understanding you will gain you the more applause.'

'How so?'

'Dear madame, you do not know my countrymen. They admire chiefly what they do not understand; in which, however, they do not differ sensibly from other nations—your own amongst others. Besides, what is valued in a vocalist is her voice. What matters the words if the sound be clear and the singer pretty? Madame Patti has triumphed in all the opera-houses and concert-rooms in the world, and yet she generally sings in Italian.'

'I am not a Patti,' answered Thérèse modestly.

'You will succeed better than she in the Alhambra, which is a kind of music-hall like yours—only none of these come near it for size, splendour, and length of bill. The Londoners must have novelties without cessation. They have never seen a performer in your line of business, with your expressive face—most of our singers being emotionless—or with your style of working up the business.'

'A truce to compliments, monsieur. You flatter me too much. Besides, you have never seen me on the stage.'

'That's true, madame; I never have seen you, much to my regret. I am only repeating what my manager says and writes, and, as he did see you, I can believe him, for he has not his match for finding 'big hits' and placing them tellingly before the British public. He has the knack of advertising, and you would arrive in London with your reputation immense—though you will justify it, and even more. Your success is certain; and you are not the first star whose fortune the Alhambra has made.'

To remain insensible to praise so deftly offered Thérèse must have been neither a woman nor a 'professional.' She thought to herself that she must abate these enthusiastic eulogies, but yet that if she had shown no talent, this manager would not be so bent on engaging her; and she almost repented being debarred by another contract.

'The best proof I can give you of the admiration he entertains for your talent is to tell you what is his offer,' proceeded Carholt. 'Twenty pounds sterling per night, dear madame.'

'Twenty pounds,' said Thérèse, 'that is—is——'

'Five hundred francs exactly. Multiply by the *acting* days in a month—remember, no Sunday performances in England—and you'll see you will take, say, fifteen thousand francs——'

Carholt missed his effect. The sum announced was so great that the young lady exclaimed:

'Surely, monsieur, you are trifling with me.'

'I understand your astonishment,' said the decoy, smiling. 'Only the very greatest artistes get such salaries in Paris. But in London, an intelligent manager, like the gentleman I represent, does not hesitate to offer so much to unknown talent, when he feels a certainty she will succeed. The very amount of his offer is in itself the best of advertisements. The press will trumpet that the new, young and lovely French vocalist is engaged for six hundred pounds a month, and everybody will want to see and hear the costly wonder.'

Again Carholt was on the wrong road. The idea of being trumpeted, as he had said, and exhibited as a wonder much shocked Thérèse, who had true womanly delicacy. But the envoy, noticing it, added:

'This is our way, dear madame, and the foremost virtuosi in the world are not offended by the terms of "wondrous" and "wonderful" on immense wall-bills posted all over the town; and they likewise approve when they find that their managers receive takings proportionate to their outlay to attract the public.'

All this was uttered so naturally that Thérèse began to believe that the offer was seriously meant. What a dream was this, which she could realize—if this man might be believed! Fortune and glory greeting her at the same time, after a short delay! It only required the Channel to be crossed for a place among the stars to be gained—*alle stelle*, as the Italians say of a prima donna in vogue. This foreign engagement, too, fulfilled all her wishes; for, since the fancied treachery of Octave de Parentis, her wish was to leave France. To show the inconstant cavalier that she had no need of him, she would have liked him to learn by the newspapers of her triumph in England. Unfortunately there was no time. Thérèse considered this the right moment to cut this parley short.

'Madame,' pursued John Carholt, 'I hope I have convinced you of my sincerity; and if, as I think, we agree, nothing opposes our finishing up things this same day. I am in a hurry to telegraph to my friend that the bargain is made, and I will be very grateful to you if you will conclude it right away. I hasten to add that, not having the honour to be known to you, I have guarantees ready—an advance payment on account of two hundred pounds, say, five thousand francs. I am authorized to do this, and even, if not enough, to——'

'Monsieur,' interrupted Thérèse, 'I blame myself for having let you go so far without telling you it is impossible for me to accept any offers, however handsome.'

'Why not, dear madame? Does this one appear not good enough?'

'It goes far beyond what I might hope.'

'Oh! you don't like leaving Paris?'

'On the contrary, I would be delighted to go.'

'Well, then, what detains you? Oh, I guess!—some little personal impediment—ha, ha! But nothing obliges you to travel alone, or live alone in London.'

'I have no such connections,' returned the singer shortly, 'and nobody has any power over me; but I have signed an engagement——'

'With whom?—this café-concert manager here? Tut, tut! but what does the engagement stipulate?'

'That I am to sing the whole of next season.'

'Some eight months hence, eh? But what about meanwhile?'

'I am prohibited singing at any other such establishment, and any theatre, too; but, mark you, on the express condition that I draw my regular salary from next month till the reopening.'

'Good! But this only applies to the Paris stage, I judge.'

'There is no exception in the paper.'

'That must be understood. It is clear that your singing in London would not do any damage to the manager of a Champs Elysées concert. All you would have to do would be to give up during your absence the retaining salary—nothing much, I dare say.'

'The figure does not matter. I have signed, and I am not going to take advantage of an omission in the agreement to break a promise.'

'This is carrying scruples too far, allow me to tell you. I'll wager that your manager will willingly arrange some change upon the basis I suggest. But, even admitting he refuses, any rupture of an agreement entails the payment of a forfeit to the injured party. What is the amount of the forfeit?'

'Ten thousand francs.'

'Is that all that stands in the way?' ejaculated Carholt jauntily. 'Ten thousand francs! That's a bagatelle which will not stop my friend, if you accept his offer.'

'What! would he pay the forfeit?' queried Thérèse.

'Certainly, dear madame, if it must be to engage you. It would be a poor sacrifice in comparison with what he is disposed to make to attach you to his theatre at fifteen thousand francs per month. It is plain, however, that he would prefer to dispense with it; and I beg still to believe that we can arrange things pleasantly with your own manager.'

'I shall not undertake to try it.'

'You are right, dear madame. It had better be me. You are an artiste, and not a woman of business, and would obtain nothing; whilst I would bring forward reasons to move your manager to make matters smooth. I shall put it to him that he has every inducement to let you sing in England during the dead season here, as he will, firstly, save the six months' salary, and next, and principally, because you will return more valuable from brilliant successes. Without spending a penny, he will benefit by their outlay across the Channel to advertise you. The advantage he will gain is so certain, that I cannot understand his refusing. But I repeat, madame, if he does refuse, notwithstanding all I say to him to show he is wrong, I will guarantee my friend doing without his leave. The ten thousand francs forfeit will be paid, and that's not paying too dear for the liberty to sing at the Alhambra Palace of Varieties. Will you let me manage the matter?'

'I have not told you I would accept,' sharply replied the singer.

'I will wait till you decide—twenty-four hours—two days, if you exact it—and meanwhile sound your manager, by your leave.'

'There is one point on which he will not give in. I am to reappear to-morrow. My name is on the bills, and if I do not sing the audience will protest.'

'You will sing, madame. Lord forbid my opposing that! On the contrary, I want to write to London that your reappearance was an ovation, and that we can work that up in the English theatrical papers. I'd have you believe that I shall be at the concert to-morrow. I am bound to applaud you.'

'You know that I am to sing every evening till the closing?'

'Quite so. Last Saturday I heard the manager say so. But the closing is not far off?'

'Before the end of the month it takes place.'

'Well, you will not come out at the Alhambra until October the 15th. You will have ample time to prepare for the journey and to settle your affairs here before starting.'

'My affairs? I have none but my engagement.'

'And that I charge myself to arrange to the satisfaction of all parties concerned. All I want is your consent.'

This conclusion was tantamount to a plump demand for yes or no; and Thérèse was very badly perplexed. Since she had let the stranger speak to her, and, above all, since he had spoken with her as they strolled about together, she had lost some of her misgivings. He spoke very well, in spite of his foreign accent, which was not English, and his arguments employed to influence her were as strong in substance as in form. His marvellous offers already appeared less incredible to the young cantatrice. This astounding agent had an answer for everything; and Thérèse, knowing nothing about England and the English, was in no position to deny that London did delight in French music-hall divas, and that the minor managers there disputed for them with bags of gold.

A few days before she would have been absolutely inaccessible to these fine phrases, and would not have thought for a minute of following his suggestions, at the risk of dropping the substance for the shadow. She listened to him with more complaisance now she believed herself cast off by Octave de Parentis, and under quite another aspect appeared exile abroad — a gilded and transient exile. It resulted that she might not have decided to take this extreme step on the faith of a suspicious stranger, but she inclined towards it with more spite than ambition in her hesitation—the spite being against the dashing captain who 'dropped her' after having made a profound impression upon her. She did not want to own to herself that she loved him, and, in quitting France, would only be gratifying her loving vexation. Whilst she wavered without speaking, Carholt tranquilly awaited with respectfulness, in the attitude and with the countenance of a perfect gentleman who desires a favourable answer, but fears to be importunate by pressing too much.

'I will think it over, monsieur,' she finally said.

'I thought you had sufficiently reflected,' commented M. Carholt, smiling. 'But heaven forbid I should worry you! You might mistake my intentions, and believe I had a personal interest in despatching the case. Pray reflect over it as much as you please. But I must inform you that my manager requires an immediate settlement, as you will understand. He must make out his list for the winter season. He counts on you; and if you fail him, he must hunt about for another big attraction, which he needs. I have already lost much time in getting to see you, though I only blame myself; but I cannot much longer defer giving an answer so impatiently expected. I did speak of forty-eight hours' delay, but I was too hasty: four-and-twenty is all I can give, at the most. And, if you will allow me to tell you so, dear madame, the experience of a pretty long life has taught me that what you put off till to-morrow is never done at all. What are you waiting for to settle things? Do you distrust me, or the validity of my offers? In this case it will be best not to carry this any further. But I like to believe this is not the hindrance; and, besides, I am ready to show you my credentials—my principal's letters, I mean—a man as well known in Paris as in London. He must be an acquaintance of your own manager's; consult him. He will tell you that the Alhambra is a great paying company, and that its manager represents solvency up to many millions of francs.'

'I do not doubt you, monsieur; but what do you want me to do now? Everything, as I have told you, hinges on my manager's consent. Against his will, I am not going to annul an engagement I signed willingly——'

'Enough for the time being for you to engage with me on condition I come to an understanding with him.'

'I do not say "No" to that.'

'It is a good deal if you will not say "No," but it is not quite enough. You may change your mind between this and to-morrow, and then I will be out in an affair for my principal, who will take me for a shuffler.'

'In other terms, you do not believe in my word now. What do you require?'

'Nothing, dear madame; and I assure you once again that I do not try to force your hand, as you have the right to reject my offers. I will transmit your reply to London, and all will be over. But how can I write to my principal, "The artiste you want to engage may accept and may not"? He would point out to me that business is not conducted on such lines, in which he would be right. Whilst if I can send him a few words from your hand——'

'Saying—what?'

'That you accept, on condition of the Ambassadeurs' manager not opposing. My friend will content himself with this engagement under reservation. But my letter ought to be off to-night.'

'Impossible!—it is half-past five. The foreign mail has gone.'

'No, no; it has been collected and made up, but I can catch the English mail at the Great Northern Station. If that were missed too, there is the telegraph; and when I have your signature I will use it. Early to-morrow morning I ought to have the reply, and before twelve I shall see your manager. If, contrary to all my anticipations, he refuses to lend you for six months to his London confrère, I will have to ask your excuses for the slight annoyance caused you by speaking to you without a presentation, as I acknowledge is against all rules, and there the matter rests.'

'Be it so,' rejoined Thérèse, after a short pause. 'On returning home, I will write such a paper as you require, and send it on to you. Where do you live?'

'I was going to tell you; but pray remark that a delay will necessarily ensue from this mode of proceeding. I cannot have your note till very late this evening. I could telegraph at any hour, but there will be nobody at the theatre after twelve or one in the morning. Hence I could not receive the reply in the morning, and could not at once approach your manager. A whole day would be lost.'

'I cannot help it.'

'I beg your pardon; on the contrary, it depends on you to end the matter directly; and I should not hesitate in your place.'

'Point out a way.'

'There's a very simple one.'

'Are you going to say that I should dash off this conditional acceptance, with a lead pencil on a card, on a bench here?'

'No, no; but why should I not see you to a convenient spot——'

'My house?'

'Yes, indeed! We can arrange the wording of the declaration, which you will write forthwith, and sign; and, on going out, I would make for the nearest telegraph station.'

CHAPTER XII.

A THEATRICAL ABDUCTION.

THIS fresh suggestion much troubled Thérèse. She might have expected it, though, for matters had gone on to the point of signatures being required. She had finally accepted the medium course—consisting in engaging for London, under proviso of her manager's consent—and it would not be proper to go back on what she had said. On the other hand, it was distasteful to her to introduce into her house this foreigner, whose name she knew, but not his address—an intermediator fallen from the clouds. She had pledged herself to receive nobody in her rooms of Beaumarchais Boulevard—where Octave de Parentis had once entered, never to enter more; and she did not feel disposed to make an exception in favour of one not inspiring perfect confidence. Not that she feared to injure her reputation, for he was certainly over sixty, and his manners were not those of a Lothario; but she thought that to sign an important paper without even knowing the domicile of the asserted agent of the London Alhambra would be a great imprudence.

She might as well walk with him into the first café, call for writing materials, and execute the engagement on one end of a marble table, between two glasses of beer—as a Thalia of the booths does when a provincial showman meets her on the street before the Théâtre des Variétés.

'Dear madame,' interposed M. Carholt, 'you seem still to hesitate. Do you see any inconvenience in my escorting you home?'

'I—I am living a good way from here,' faltered Thérèse, not seeing how to get out of the quandary.

'If the distance alone is a bar, I have a good horse to my carriage.'

'That's not all. I do not care to complete the business in my rooms, where I am living alone.'

'Very good; I understand. You remind me very appositely that I have not the honour to be known to you, and that you are not obliged to rely on my sheer assertion. I might be a joker in bad taste, and the contract a hoax. You are therefore right a hundred times in requiring me to justify my standing. Luckily it is most easy. I am correspondent of the Alhambra manager, who cannot at once answer for me, since he is in London; but I am also a commission merchant, established in Paris. I have an office, warehouse, clerks, and I enjoy in my part of the town a fair reputation. You need only come there to assure yourself; and we shall be better there than elsewhere for drawing up our little document. My proposing our going to your house, madame, was to avoid giving you trouble, and also out of delicacy. It is not customary for a young lady to go even into merchants' offices; but when the merchant is my age, I doubt if it is of any consequence. As for any trouble to me, or anymore to you, dear madame, I hasten to offer you my carriage to take you home after we get through. This is agreed, eh? "Silence gives consent,"' added the commission agent gaily, familiar with all the proverbs and finesses of French speech.

At the same time he made a sign to his coachman, who had followed him, without the singer perceiving it, perched on the box of an elegant coupé. He was stationed beside the footway of the Place de la Concorde. The still perplexed Thérèse did not wear the mien of going to step in.

'Have a care, madame,' said Carholt, with a frank, hearty laugh. 'If you refuse my company you will make me conceited with the idea you take me for a dangerous fellow—a lady-killer! But look at me. I am an old man.'

He might have added, 'But hale yet!' but all he did say was:

'Come, come! what do you fear? My glass-fronted coupé is open as a lantern. It is daylight and the streets are gorged with people. A man with evil designs would act quite otherwise. This is not the reign of your Merry Monarch Louis XV., I am not a powerful nobleman, and the day has gone by when pretty women were abducted in the heart of Paris. The drive I propose will only last twenty minutes; and, once arrived, you will be as much in safety as in your own dwelling, for my house is a very warren of clerks and customers. You leave when you like, and I beg you to believe I have no intention to detain you in spite of yourself.'

Carholt spoke so well that his hearer felt ashamed at having evinced any alarm ; besides, her alarm was rather instinctive than reasoned out. She felt perfectly able to master this man if he forgot respect, by any impossibility, and she could not imagine she ran any danger. Of robbery she had no fear, for she wore no jewellery and carried no money, and thieves do not ride in carriages. Perfectly decided in any case to sign only a conditional agreement, Thérèse might with propriety go and conclude it at his place of business.

'Let us go, monsieur,' she said at length.

A flash of joy shot out of Carholt's eyes, but he did not throw off any of the courteous reserve worn ever since the commencement of the conference beneath the horse-chestnuts. He slightly bowed to thank the lady for having had confidence in him ; he escorted her to the carriage and opened the door, and handed her in with much attention. In English he gave an order to the coachman, and took a seat next Thérèse, who was growing more and more encouraged. She never thought to ask whither they were going, for that little mattered. A commission agent would live in a central quarter and in a respectable house, where she would run no risk. The horse flew like an arrow towards the Rue Royale, and the journey bid fair not to last long at this pace. The vehicles were packed as they brought back from the park the happy ones of this world. It was admirable autumnal weather, and this part of the city seemed rejoicing in the clear sunshine.

'I am sure you will sigh for Paris at the beginning,' said M. Carholt softly ; 'but you will quickly get used to England. The climate may be faulty, but life is very comfortable. And then you will meet so many compensations—success and sovereigns !'

'I should sigh for nothing in leaving France,' remarked Thérèse, who would not have said this before what she called the captain's treachery.

'What ! not even this bright sky ? It is summer's farewell to us. The air is as warm as in June. If you'll allow, I'll open my window.'

Just what she wanted done. She had already lowered her own, because she was too warm, and, over and above that, because she wanted everybody to be able to see into the interior of the carriage. She was granted her wish, and something more. Before the Madeleine their conveyance was caught in a crush and the coachman had to go at a walking pace. Consequently the foot-passengers crossing the road just then were brought cheek by jowl beside the occupants of the conveyances, almost stopping.

As chance often manages matters clumsily, who should be at hand but Savinien de Coulibœuf, who instantly recognised the recent prima donna of the

Ambassadeurs'. Since the duel which his silly talk had contributed to bring upon the captain, he was embroiled with his cousin, and he was not a little satisfied to surprise the songstress in a carriage with an elderly person, who looked to be what, in the rascally set, is styled 'the keeper.' If Parentis tried again to stand up in defence of this vocal prodigy, Savinien had the secret to clinch his nail, and he strongly vowed not to deprive himself of the sport of relating to his amiable friends what a meeting he had had. In order the better to advertise his hostile intentions, he said loud enough to be overheard :

'Ha, ha ! This is worth knowing.'

Thérèse recognised him from seeing him in the Jardin d'Acclimatation, and immediately understood that this ridiculous fair puppy was her open enemy. And the further idea struck her that it was he who had overruled Octave from seeing her again. To cut short his manifestations as well as show him the antipathy he inspired, she quickly pulled up the window. To this token of scorn, Couliboeuf replied by ironically bowing, and passed on his way.

'What is the matter, dear madame ?' inquired M. Carholt, who had not missed any of the little scene, 'has somebody dared insult you ?'

'No, no,' murmured Thérèse. 'It was a man who stared rather hard, and so I shut the window in his face—that's all.'

'Well done ! This town swarms with cads and snobs. Such things never occur in London. Do you know the impudent fellow?'

'Perhaps, by sight. I sang a whole season in a place where many people come.'

'Just so. All Paris would know you—as you will be known in London before a month. This is one of the inconveniences of fame and talent.'

Thérèse made no comment on the compliment. The sight of the shallow-brain had revived her sorrow by recalling the catastrophe in the Singalese Village, and she was so absorbed in her sad meditation that she did not notice what road the vehicle took. Instead of keeping on in the boulevards it turned up to the left without Thérèse heeding it, and Carholt contrived to keep her attention engaged by prolonging the dialogue begun about the unimportant event.

'Happily,' he continued, 'you will be much less exposed in London to unpleasant rencontres. It is so large that a celebrity may stroll around incognito—even one as lovely as yourself. Besides, no real gentleman speaks to a strange lady in the street. You are about to observe,' proceeded he merrily, 'that I broke this rule of good society as regards you. I would not have dared do it in London, and here my excuse was the urgency, and my not being able to act otherwise under penalty of losing an occasion not to be found again. I hope you have already forgiven me.'

Thérèse politely nodded, and the interminable Carholt resumed emphatically:

'On what depends the destiny of an artiste! If the whim had not seized me on Saturday last to go into a music-hall where I do not look in twice a year, I would not have heard the whole audience calling loudly for you, and, probably, you would not appear at the Alhambra, where you will make your fortune. True, I know you could do without an engagement, since you could live away from the stage for a year; but money is not to be scorned, particularly when it comes accompanied by glory. Did you never repine at no longer being applauded every evening?'

'Very often indeed,' replied Thérèse; 'but I had reason for retiring.'

'I do not ask them, dear madame. Enough for me that they do not exist, or otherwise you would not go on again. By-the-bye, I have one or two questions to put to you which ought not to offend you, as they relate to the agreement under consideration. Have you attained your majority?'

'Two years ago.'

'One can hardly believe it, you look so much younger. I suppose your parents will not oppose your departure for London?'

'I have none. My mother was the last, and died last year.'

'And—excuse my asking such a thing—not married, eh?'

'I am a widow.'

'Already! that is pitiable at your age; and yet it is a happy thing, if I may venture to say it, for liberty is the first of all blessings to a cantatrice. All those who form family ties regret it.'

'It will not happen to me, for I shall remain what I am.'

'A very wise thing, dear madame, unless one of our lords sues for your hand.'

Thérèse frowned as she looked fixedly at the speaker, who perceived he was going too far, and that the young lady was dubious as to his bantering her.

'Upon my word I am not jesting,' he quickly said. 'The occurrence is not rare in London, and I could quote more than one instance; but I am of your opinion—independence is worth more to an artiste than a British peeress's coronet. Besides, we are not at that point yet. Still, we are nearing the end of this short drive, which you have been good enough to undertake with me. In five minutes we arrive, and I shall have the honour to receive you under my roof, which will not long shelter you.'

Carholt had not too highly sung the praises of his horse, which made the sparks fly off the paving, and had not altered its pace although going up a tolerably steep incline. The coupé would be therefore far enough from the grand boulevards; but Thérèse did not think of reading the Board of Works tablets giving the names of streets they passed, and she did not know where they were. Always living by the Bastile, she little knew faraway districts. The Bonhommes resided in the

Rue des Trois-Bornes, near the St. Martin's Canal, and, save a few scarce visits to their works, Thérèse only went to and fro between Beaumarchais Boulevard and the Champs Elysées. Since her mother's death she had never gone to any place of amusement, and still less out shopping, or merely for a stroll. She lived like a nun, and she went for the first time to the Jardin d'Acclimatation on that day of the catastrophe. It little mattered to her in any case whither she was led by the self-asserted representative of the London manager. It was still daytime; she saw passengers on the footway and the shops open, and she did not doubt M. Carholt was respectably housed. Commission-merchants, as he called himself, are generally imposingly lodged.

She was not wrong, for, after several rather long circuits up rising ground, the carriage stopped before a medium-class house of fair appearance. On the ground-floor front were two open shops, or rather offices, protected streetward by iron gratings, and separated by an open hall. On the right, a little farther on, was a carriage archway leading into a courtyard, at the end of which doubtlessly were coachhouse and stables. The house had two floors, both with balconies to the windows, set off with boxes of flowering plants—altogether the business and dwelling-place of a rich merchant, who liked his ease but did not neglect his concerns. The offices received customers and the living-rooms were for his family, if John

Carholt had any. Thérèse did not inquire upon this head ; but he certainly had clerks, for one of them was standing at the mouth of the central hallway—a tall fellow, somewhat shabby, in shirt-sleeves, with no cap on and a pen behind his ear. No doubt he had been watching for his employer's return, for he ran out to help him alight.

'Is anybody waiting for me in my office ?' inquired M. Carholt.

The man understood French, but probably did not speak it, for he answered in English with a rather lengthy explanation of which the lady did not understand a word.

'Dear madame,' said the commission agent, offering her his hand, 'my clerk tells me that three of my customers have taken possession of the office where I intended to receive you. I am therefore obliged to ask your coming with me to the office where I manage my correspondence. It will do just as well for writing and signing the few lines we have in view. But it is in the other wing, across the yard.'

Thérèse had not come so far to retreat at the last moment. She waved her hand, as much as to say it was indifferent where the conditional engagement was drawn up.

'William,' said M. Carholt to his coachman, 'don't put up, for in a quarter of an hour you will have to take this lady wherever she tells you to drive ; and return straight, as I am going out at nine.'

Had Thérèse entertained any suspicions, this jovial agent's tone and bearing must have dissipated them. All he said and did was so natural that she never dreamt of his laying a snare. She followed him without distrust into the corridor, large and well-lighted from the street. On both hands were doors, with indicative inscriptions, such as 'Office,' 'Stores,' 'Private Office,' etc., under the latter being the master's initials, 'J. C.'

'My cabinet,' said M. Carholt, on his way by, 'where you would have been shown in, only for its being occupied.'

There were voices audible behind the door—in all likelihood those of the three customers mentioned by the clerk—beguiling the time in chat whilst awaiting the merchant.

More and more at ease, Thérèse kept on, preceded by M. Carholt, till they entered a passage covered in with gray canvas, waving from the outer air.

'We are crossing the yard,' observed the amiable agent of the London Palace of Varieties; 'a very large one, and I had this covered-way made in order not to get wet when it rains.'

Under this awning, which had no apertures, one could see less clearly than in the outer hall; but still it was enough to show one the way, and Thérèse had no alarm. But she began to be a little astonished at the internal plan of the commission merchant's house; it seemed to comprise a whole block of buildings, for the canvas-covered passage had no end. Thérèse beheld her singular adventure under a new aspect. She began to say inwardly that she had been highly imprudent to confide blindly in a man never seen before he accosted her in the Champs Elysées. But Carholt gave her no time to reflect.

'Here we are!' he exclaimed lightly. 'One more piece to cross, and you will see light again. I believe you will not be sorry at that, and I must beg excuses for this journey in the twilight. A door to open, and we are there.'

Thérèse heard a key turning in a lock, and light streamed in at once out of a large room well furnished and lighted.

'Pass, madame!' said M. Carholt politely.

Encouraged by the aspect of the apartment, Thérèse went on. But her guide did not follow. The door slammed behind her.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PEARL OF MERCHANTS.

SINCE the duel, so unpleasantly ending for Octave de Parentis, ex-Corporal Bask-in-the-Sun led a sorely burdensome existence. He saw his captain every day, but he was no longer on the footing of old, and perceived clearly that the invalid owed him a grudge for having brought Daubrac to him. He did not dissemble his having done a great wrong in confabulating with a man of whom he knew insufficient, and he did all he could to redeem his fault. He even renounced seeking the Chamboulive property, and went so far on the opposite road as to abstain from seeing Daubrac, who was endeavouring most earnestly to recover the vanished securities. He did not dare mention the man to the officer, who would have certainly silenced him if he had thus brought up the unhappy incident of the money-vampire's decoy being introduced to the Viscount de Chavigny's seconds; still less did he venture to speak of the bride of a day, the prime cause of all the captain's tribulations, although he seemed to have forgotten her. Nevertheless, Grippe-Soleil fancied he did still think of her much more than he had any air of doing.

What was to be done when in doubt? debated poor Caradoc. How could he help on the captain's secret desires? How, without vexing him, go to the aid of the young lady in whom he was perhaps still interested, although he affected not to be? After what had happened it was playing a big stake to meddle with his private matters. On the other hand, though, if the captain still loved Thérèse, what a success it would be for Jean Caradoc if he managed to preserve her from dangers she might incur! What a splendid chance of re-entering into the favour of M. de Parentis, loving in spite of himself!

Of all the dangers, the most serious for the pretty widow was falling under the claws of Baroda, whose track the Spahi had lost since the first evening. Had he shown any signs of life since his disappearance? Caradoc was ignorant of it, as of all Thérèse had done since her widowhood began, the captain having taken good care not to apprise his former corporal of her *début* at the Café des Ambassadeurs.

Caradoc, whilst cognisant of her abode, could not go there for several reasons; she was not the idol of his heart; she might not receive him; and, lastly, if the call came to the lover's knowledge, he might take it in very ill part.

But nothing opposed Caradoc hunting after the snake-charmer, whom he believed he could catch, since he had not left Paris up to when Caradoc spied him in the Champs Elysées. The captain could not fairly resent the recent showman of the Singalese Village giving chase to a fugitive from it, and, anyway, he need not know about it. Grippe-Soleil's step might render a great service to the inspirer of Baroda's wild passion, and there was nothing entangling about it, as the old soldier meant to gather information merely whether Baroda had gone away with his serpents or remained in Paris, whereupon he would inquire cunningly upon his projects.

Nothing was more easy, as Caradoc knew the merchant in pearls—of whom he had spoken to M. de Parentis—a highly civilized East Indian, living alternately in London and Paris. He had been long connected with the Ceylonese juggler;

they had mutual business interests, for Baroda was a capitalist, and Caradoc had really seen them together as stated. Caradoc did not doubt that the snake-performer had taken refuge at his fellow-countryman's. He knew all the more about their intimacy from the pearl-dealer having come to the Jardin d'Acclimatation to see Baroda a few days after the Singalese's arrival. Caradoc had met the cosmopolitan trader in India. They had renewed acquaintance in Paris, and the Frenchman had been twice to his house, though holding him to be a suspicious customer. He went to consult him about investments, and had had to praise him for his advice. So he had good grounds for calling and asking news of the runaway Singalese.

A few days following the duel, he decided to attempt the essay. He came from seeing his captain was improving, but gloomier than ever, he thought, notwithstanding the doctor allowing him out on the morrow. It was the time to go after intelligence, for fear M. de Parentis, being released, might have the same idea, and Grippe-Soleil did not like being forestalled.

So away he sauntered to the Rue du Mont Cenis, where the pearl-merchant dwelt, and he was lucky enough to find him indoors, haggling over bargains with his customers. This exotic trafficker traded in all lines, from the largest jewellers to the smallest pedlars. He did not scorn small profits, and sometimes gained as much, keeping due proportion in mind, on a badly-cut diamond as on a string of the purest Oriental pearls. Above all, he had no peer for making up a set. At a pinch he would have found a pendant to the Koh-i-noor; for his coffers were swollen to bursting with precious stones of all sizes.

He greeted Jean Caradoc wonderfully cordially, made him sit down near him in his sanctum, offered him an excellent cigar, and hastened to get rid of his customers so as to be wholly at his command.

'What good wind blows you here, dear friend?' he inquired as soon as they were by themselves in the study. 'Stay!' he interrupted himself, 'you prefer to speak French, don't you?'

'Yes, if it's the same to you,' responded the Spahi.

'Completely the same, my dear fellow. I only ask you because I know you are a polyglot—a man of many tongues. In the Gardens you took pleasure in talking Singalese with me, to the huge amazement of the cockneys, who listened agape. But here we are alone, and French is more fit. What's the matter? More money to put out?'

'Unfortunately not. I shall have to draw out more likely. I have lost my place.'

'What do you say? How's that? Those idiots have turned you off? They can never find a man to replace you. What did they dismiss you for?'

'On account of that story all the newspapers told: a visitor was clumsy enough to let a cobra nip him.'

'I did indeed read that, but never suspected it concerned you. The accident was none of your bringing about, eh?'

'It was the man's fault, firstly, and Baroda's to boot.'

'Baroda?' repeated the dealer in precious stones.

'Why, yes—he did not even stay to prove it was not done on purpose, but cut away immediately after the accident; and, as you know him, I come to ask news of him.'

'I know him, true enough; but may the devil carry me away if I know where the devil has carried him.'

'Really! now I thought——'

'What, what?'

'Here goes. On the evening of the accident I was strolling in the Champs Elysées, in the footway beside the Avenue Gabriel, when I saw you go by.'

'Quite likely. What day was that?'

'Saturday last, about nine.'

'Indeed, I believe I was on that road, returning from seeing a client in Antin Avenue.'

'But you were with Baroda!'

'Are you sure?' queried the pearl-merchant, smiling.

'I recognised him clearly, though he was dressed like a Cossack.'

'What did you conclude from this meeting?'

'I fancied he had recourse to you to get out of such a scrape. He is fully cunning enough to understand that the police would be laid on his trail, and as he has no acquaintances in Paris but you——'

'You reasoned that he would ask me to hide him. It would not be stupid of him. Would you blame me for doing him that kindness?'

'Not a bit. I know you have long been connected in business.'

'He is, moreover, my fellow-countryman.'

'And such should help one another. I see that plainly. I am not coming to you with any design to betray him, believe me. I do not wish him any harm, although he is the cause of my getting the discharge. I only want to learn that he is in safety.'

'So you are interested in him?'

'As any man would be in one whom he has not quitted during four or five months. You see, too, that I have not hurried myself coming to ask.'

'But you made up your mind about it eventually, eh?'

'Through curiosity rather than any other motive, to say nothing of the pleasure of seeing you again.'

'A pleasure I share, my dear Caradoc—please to believe. But what will you think of me when I tell you the truth after I have told you the—the opposite?'

'I shall think you acted wisely. It never does to show the bottom of your bag of tricks too hastily. You were not obliged to own up before knowing why I sounded you about Baroda. But now you are settled about my intentions, it seems to me you may speak out without circumbendibuses and with no holding back.'

'The very thing I was going to do,' said the trader in pearls. 'My dear Caradoc, it is ten years since I saw Baroda for the first time.'

'Ten years!' echoed Corporal Bask-in-the-Sun. 'Why, what age is he?'

'Upon my soul I can't tell. All I can say is that he was very young when he called on me one fine day where I was residing in Bombay, to sell a lot of splendid pearls he had himself fished up on the Ceylon coast. Since, I learnt that he was diving for a pearl-fishery company, and defrauded it by putting aside the finest of his catch. When he showed them to me I did not bicker, but paid him prompt cash—two-thirds of their value. I made a nice round sum on that, none the less. Since then I have done other affairs with him, and we have both made a penny. But I came to Europe to settle here, and had about forgotten him when he informed me a few months back that he had arrived in Paris with a Singalese troupe, engaged by the Jardin d'Acclimatation. Remark that he can read and write no European tongue ; but he is so intelligent that he obtained my address before leaving Ceylon, and managed to notify me of his arrival. I received a telegram here, sent by the devil only knows whom. I had no reason to refuse to see him, so I went to the Gardens, and was agreeably surprised to see you exercising the functions of an interpreter and superintendent. I was still more astonished to learn that the once pearl-diver, Baroda, had changed his trade after making a fortune, and came here bearer of a letter of credit for a large amount. There's no gainsaying it—I saw the letter, and can certify his being rich—richer than you may imagine ; but it did not prevent him engaging as serpent-charmer in the troupe you were the manager of.'

'Not quite so high a post,' corrected Grippe-Soleil modestly.

'Oh, you may not have had the title, but you performed the duties. To return to Baroda :

the rogue is a first-class business man, and, if he could change his skin, he would certainly make a place among the financiers who lead the 'Changes of France and England. But his colour and his training oppose that. He resembles a brazen statue, and is a savage under the bronze, although he has all the vices of the civilized.'

'You know him thoroughly. I judge him exactly like you, which is why I question if he did not treat himself to the fun of making one of his cobras bite an unoffending spectator.'

'I believe he is capable of it, but I haven't any proof. Here is what happened. About six o'clock last Saturday afternoon, a boy in a blouse came here with one of my visiting-cards, on the back of which Baroda had pencilled a few Hindustanee words—the only tongue he can write a smattering of. He begged me to come and find him, at nightfall, in the Bois de Boulogne, at a spot where I had a stroll with him one morning when he was allowed out of your Gardens—the Isle of Cedars, close to the Allée de Longchamp, and not far from the Gardens. Very much puzzled, I went thither in a cab, and found Baroda shivering with cold in a clump of trees, where he had ensconced himself. He told me a story that would send a squirrel to sleep—how he had quarrelled with one of his fellows and given him a nasty blow, and run away, fearing to be arrested——'

'Did he not speak about his snakes?'

'Not a word.'

'They say he took them with him.'

'I hardly believe that—unless he carried them in a leather bag which never leaves him; it contains a pretty sum in gold, and his letter of credit on the Union Bank of London. You ought to have seen him in that array!—nude to the waist, and a kind of tinsel cap on—you would have roared! I had no inclination that way, because I did not see my way out of it. He besought me to harbour him here. You may judge how little I was tempted to give hospitality in this house, where I have no room to spare—and he such a sight! I refused bluntly. Then he entreated me to help him away to England at once. I was as eager; but it was not easy. The first thing was to procure him some dress that would let him travel without being arrested on the way. I began by throwing my top-coat over his shoulders. I had come in a cab which was awaiting me in the Allée de Longchamp. I got him into it, and ordered the driver to take us to the Avenue Wagram, to an old clothes dealer whom I knew from having lent him money last year. He sold me an overcoat and a fur cap, in which I put Baroda and took him to the circus of the Champs Elysées, where we got down.'

'The circus? Why there?'

'Because I distrusted the cabman. They are all more or less spies for the police, and they read the newspapers. If I had kept him, he would have read the next day in some one-sou sheet about the "Tragedy at the Jardin d'Acclimatation," and he would not have failed to run and tell the police-inspector for his quarter he had taken up a Singalese at the Isle of Cedars. I am convinced so. But, thanks to my precaution in leaving him in the Champs Elysées, he could not say that the Singalese went away by the Great Northern Railway——'

'Oh, he got away, did he?'

'That same evening, my dear friend, in this way: We walked down the footway—where you saw us, though you must have good eyes, for I did not perceive you. The passengers turned a little to see Baroda's odd costume; but such queer ones are seen in Paris! They took him for some Polish Jew—a vendor of opera-glasses, or the like, and we were not mobbed. In short, a little beyond the Palais de l'Industrie I called another cab on the pick-up by the kerb, and away we went to the Great Northern Terminus. That's the tale, my dear old Caradoc. Is it not funny?'

'Very; but how did Baroda get off by the train, when he does not speak French? and how will he fare on the journey?'

'Very well; I bought his ticket and handed it to him, and "tipped" the train-conductor to look after him as far as Boulogne. There Baroda will need no help, for he knows enough English to get information, and everybody speaks English at Boulogne. He has safely arrived in London; I had news of him from my correspondent. It appears M. Baroda is delighted with England.'

'And has no intention of returning to France?'

'Dear, no! He will pass himself off there for a nabob, and amuse himself in his own way. Our Singalese is a character. He has every vice, and all boldness possible; and with plenty of money he may end by enchanting some lady; all the more likely as the animal is handsome, though his hide is chocolate. What a greedy fellow he must be to join your troupe! He got his passage to France free; that's what he was after.'

'Quite so. If I tell you he accepted coppers and cigars like the others, you'll not believe me.'

'But I do, I do. I know him, and no mistake. He is capable of anything.'

'I heard he had been a highway robber in Bengal.'

'I don't know anything about that; but, between ourselves, I am not going to be greatly astonished if he commits some great crime in England, when they will hang him swift and high.'

'I shall not weep for him!'

'Nor I. But I wonder who will inherit from him? Probably the State.'

'A question not going to worry me, I confess. Enough for me to know that Baroda is no longer in France, and will never return.'

'You may be tranquil on that score. But tell me, did you not fear he would play you some trick of his trade?'

'Not I!'

'I mean, maybe to some friend of yours?'

'Well, to a woman in whom I am interested.'

'Oh, you sly dog! Still running after the pussies! I must compliment you.'

'Not at all; they are not my game. Women are quite indifferent to me. I even own that they horrify me. But I know some persons who adore them, one in particular—an officer under whose orders I served in Tonkin.'

'And he fears that Baroda will charm away his lady-love?' laughed the pearl-trader.

'It is not that. I am talking about the newly-made bride whose husband was bitten the other day by one of Baroda's serpents. He devoured her with his eyes, and he would not hesitate to steal her away if he found a chance.'

'Then it's this officer who sent you here for information?'

'He!—he does not even know you exist. It was purely my idea to apply to you.'

'An excellent idea, since you are now set at ease. You can tell your friend from me that Baroda will never set foot in Paris any more. I would tell him so myself if I knew where he lived. What did you say his name was?'

Corporal Grippe-Soleil, who was in full swing to commit imprudent acts, was about to name the captain, when a cautious tapping came at the room door.

'The deuce!' growled the dealer, visibly annoyed.

'One of your customers, no doubt,' observed Caradoc. 'I do not want to be in the way; I shall be off.'

A little late in the day he perceived that he had spoken too much about his captain, and he was overjoyed at this excuse to cut short a conversation becoming dangerous; but the other, spurred by the hope to hear Caradoc complete his confidential revelation, was not disposed to let him leave.

'I beg you to remain,' he said quickly. 'You will do me a service by saving me from a bore come to pester me about some trumpery business.

Besides,' he added, lowering his voice, 'I have a number of things to tell you about Baroda.'

The old soldier thought he would be wrong to refuse to hear this supplementary information. On seeing him hesitate, the friend of the snake-charmer persisted in detaining him.

'Won't you behave nice, now, eh?' he said familiarly. 'You will? Then do me the pleasure of passing behind this curtain. I have a kind of snuggery there—a *buen retiro*—where I sometimes receive fashionable gentlemen or ladies with diamonds to sell, who come under the cloak to see me. There are seats. I'll just go and see who knocked. If a customer, and the business is worth attending to, I shall let him in and get through with him in five minutes, and we can take up our talk where we were interrupted.'

'Anything to oblige you,' returned the old soldier. 'But you are forgetting that I shall not miss one word of what you say to your caller.'

'It is no difference to me; I have no secrets, least of all as regards you.'

The rapping came anew, a little louder this time. The merchant rose, took Caradoc by the hand to conduct him to the back of his cabinet, where he pulled aside the hangings, and, pointing to a chair in a recess, let fall the curtain. Returning to the door, he held it on the jar.

'Eh? Oh, it is you!' he ejaculated.

'Yes, it's me,' answered a voice which made Caradoc prick up his ears. 'Am I disturbing you?'

'No—if you haven't come for a long stay.'

'You know well enough that I never dawdle over affairs, and never come about petty profits. Still, if you are busy——'

'I was slow to open to you, because I had a client; but I have let him out by the private door. Come in, my dear friend.'

CHAPTER XIV.

LISTENERS NEVER HEAR ANY GOOD (?).

THE visitor entered and took a place before the pearl-merchant's desk, turning his back to Grippe-Soleil, who, besides, did not care to peep between the hangings.

'If you have come about money to borrow, I must warn you that the terms will be stiff, for these are hard times,' commenced the trader.

'All right! I know that old song. Chamboulive sang it to me often enough; but it did not prevent him doing all the business I proposed to him.'

'And did not prevent his dying stupidly.'

Caradoc had not expected to hear his uncle's name spoken. How came it that the Rue du Mont Cenis lapidary knew this relative who exchanged coin for good paper, but not for pearls or diamonds?

'In any case he does not know I am the nephew,' thought Bask-in-the-Sun. 'If he did he would have shut the other party up to stop me hearing what he has to say about Chamboulive—if he is really the object of this call.'

'It is always stupid to die, but it happens to everybody,' remarked the new-comer philosophically. 'Chamboulive had no more wish than you to "miss his tip"—and in fact it is disagreeable when a man has millions.'

'Oh, millions!'

'Why, yes—I'll bet there's four; but you ought to know the exact figure, being his bosom friend.'

'I never reckoned it up with him.'

'I believe that; but he must have spoken more than once of his fortune. He did to me, who was no *pal* of his—*pahli*, brother, you understand!—only he forgot to tell me where it was boxed away.'

'Pardon me, dear friend,' interrupted the dealer in gems, 'but I do not suppose you came here to prattle about Chamboulive and his investments.'

'That's just all I have come for.'

'Then you will have to excuse me closing the session. I have no time to-day for chatter.'

'Nor I. Take the trouble to hear me out, and you will see that this is grave and big business.'

'Explain, and try to be brief.'

'I am going to be so, and you will understand forthwith. You admit Chamboulive was rich?'

'I do.'

'You also know that, after his sudden death, not a penny-piece was found in his Grand Hotel room, or his office in the Rue Milton—nothing but a few thousand franc-notes in his *portemonnaie*, which went for his funeral or something else, for I suspect his pockets were "dragged for shiners." In short, it is not known where he stored his money.'

'Do you imagine I know?'

'You are more likely to than another.'

'Why, please?'

'Because you were in Chamboulive's own water

—the double life, or even triple, for he had three places of abode.'

'Never knew more than two.'

'Unfortunately, everything indicates his wealth as lying in the third, where he slept and kept gay company. I fancy you know where it is situated.'

'You are mad. Chamboulive was an old scamp who held revel—I have heard him brag of it, and I believe it—but he never invited me. Does it chance that you are expecting to find out this Bluebeard's castle, which probably never existed?'

'I dare say I could find it, if you would help me a little.'

'At me again! It is plain, old fellow, you are not serious.'

'Let me have done. I am all but sure that Chamboulive's hoard has remained where he hid it. Apoplexy struck him down without warning, before he could remove it or tell its whereabouts, for he had no time to get out a word. It follows that the treasure is at the grasp of whomsoever knows the hiding-place.'

'Do you suggest I have found it?'

'I don't say that. You may well know the palace of revelry where our merry-maker lodged, and yet not have unearthed the treasure he left, for he must have taken precautions against the boon companions brought there laying hands upon it.'

A cloud passed over the pearl-merchant's visage, and the financial agent, who watched him, thought he had hit the right nail on the head.

'This is a mere supposition on my part,' he resumed, 'but admit I have guessed true. In that case I may be useful to you to discover what you have not found, for I have hints about Chamboulive's habits which you cannot possess.'

'You come to offer your services as gold-finder, for a reward upon your success ?—another company to raise the silver galleons of Vigo Bay, eh ?'

'You must think me an awful fool !'

'Quite the reverse; I rate you very clever.'

'I should not be so if I hoped to get you into a spec which you could work without me. I have something better to propose than partnership with a very problematical success.'

'Clearly unfold yourself, will you ? for I do not at all understand what you want of me.'

'Look here, Chamboulive was thicker with you than me, because you went halves in his operations, whilst I was only his commission-agent. But you yourself have just told me that he did not initiate you into the little mysteries of his private life. He was less nice as regards me, from knowing I was familiar with some of his lady friends.'

'Did he invite you to some of the festivities he offered them ?' inquired the dealer ironically.

'Not a bit ! The old skinflint liked to have all his fun to himself. But when I hinted that he would get robbed by the hussies he introduced into his house, he always answered that the robbery would not benefit them, as his property was all in securities payable to a named subscriber, which could not be sold if abstracted.

'Indeed, I think I can aver that his stocks and bonds were all entered in his name ; but I still do not see what you are aiming at.'

'I am almost there. If nobody finds these papers, the gain will be to the State and Corporation, since they will not pay coupons unless the scrip is produced.'

'That's evident. Go on!'

'On the contrary, if they do turn up, Chamboulive's heirs can get them transferred to them.'

'More and more evident. And if the securities are found and not the heirs, they will be stored at the Department of Deposit and Consignments for thirty years, when poor old Chamboulive's fortune will be turned over to the public treasury. He was Paris born, if I am not wrong, so it will be for the French Government to benefit by the millions.'

'It will come in timely, for the French Government will want a few millions then; but it will come into your pocket and mine more happily.'

'Assuredly. Unfortunately, I cannot guess how you will bring it into them.'

'Yet it is simple. We have only to find the heirs and speak to them thus: "I know where your kinsman's property is, and you do not. How much will you give me for telling you?"'

The pearl-trader started. At last he comprehended, and, remembering rather tardily that Caradoc would be hearing their interesting dialogue, he glanced instinctively towards the curtain concealing the late showman of the Singalese.

'What's the matter? Are we not alone here?' questioned the visitor.

'Yes, yes—quite alone,' answered the other coolly.

'Oh! so much the better. I thought——'

'Because I turned that way? It is an old habit of mine, to make sure there are no bystanders when I am talking important business.'

'So you do acknowledge at length that what I bring you is worth attention?'

'No doubt;—and so many people come through this cabinet that sometimes I forget whether all have gone or not. Moreover, I believe in the saying that walls have ears, which is why, on principle, I prefer always to speak in veiled language.'

'Even here?'

'Even here, dear friend. However well built, a house is never completely safe. If I had secrets to confide in anybody, I should make the appointment with him in the middle of the largest open space in the city.'

'By Jove, that's a good idea!' said the go-between, laughing. 'When I have anything again for your private ear, I will remember to appoint the Obelisk in the Place de la Concorde. Meanwhile I will go on with my speech, since it begins to interest you.'

The lapidary was on thorns. He would have liked to check the tongue of this visitor, about to cross his t's and dot his i's, as the saying runs; yet he did not want to avow that there was a listener, for the other might be angered, and go away without making himself clear. How could he hush him without giving a reason? On the other hand, the wary dealer had no idea that Caradoc was nearly affected by the Chamboulive inheritance, and no high idea of his faculties. Hence he judged he might, without too much detriment, let the private inquiry agent expose his plans, ready to cut him short if he was going too far.

'I was saying,' continued the latter, 'that the great point was to find the heirs, and lead them to share with us.'

'You are always supposing we hold the papers, and this we do not do.'

'We shall have them, whenever you like. It can't be knocked out of my head that you know where they are.'

'I am not going to amuse myself in discussing with you to show you are mistaken. I limit myself to observing that if I held them, and were the man to attempt such a speculation, I should not need you.'

'Pardon me, dear friend. You cannot do without me, because you do not know the heirs.'

'Do you?'

'It seems so, from my coming to ask you to go into the game with me. You know where the Chamboulive property is—I where the owners are. We can come to an agreement.'

'Over the heads of Chamboulive's relatives?'

'Good gracious, yes! I think you would make no scruples. Business is business; and those parties will be only too grateful if we leave them some of the inheritance, of which they would not touch a copper unless we help them. I undertake to negotiate with them, and I am certain they will accept any conditions whatsoever.'

'And you will solely benefit by the arrangement?'

'You have a very bad opinion of me; but I am not offended. I will merely answer that I cannot make a deal without you, as you hold the cards. It is true that, if you will not work the oracle with me, I should still have to hunt up "the briefs" all alone, in Chamboulive's house. I know some of the ladies he brought there, and they have already supplied me with clues which will get me indoors, I hope. If I succeed, you mustn't take it ill if I treat direct, since you refuse your alliance; and you must do me the justice to own that I came spontaneously to offer you mine. I have played with my cards upon the table, for I have hinted of the existence of heirs whom you have never heard spoken of. I owed you that much, in memory of the discounts and commissions you made me gain in Chamboulive's time; but you must admit that you will have no call to reproach me if you will not profit by the warning. Now, old fellow, I expect a categorical answer—and immediate, for I have no time to lose, you must understand. Time's money! particularly in such a matter, where anybody may come along and cut the ground from under my feet.'

'Not anybody—no! for only one knowing the heirs could make anything out of it.'

'And I'm the only one "in the know"—that's true. But chance may set them on the scent, and then, you may believe, they will dispense with intermediaries. If they learn where the hiding-place is, you or I or anybody else will not be needed, for they will only have to establish their standing as the natural heirs.'

This chain of reasoning was linked so neatly that the pearl-merchant did not try to refute it. 'Then they are not on the right track?' he inquired after a short silence.

'No, not yet.'

'But, at least, they know they should inherit?'

'Maybe they do.'

'I put the question to you because, if they know that, they will evidently move heaven and earth to get to handle the heritage, and will probably succeed. Chamboulive was known to a great many people, and by applying to the police, or merely to an inquiry office for next-of-kin, they will learn where their relative lived, where he was in the habit of going, and many another thing. With these clues, they will finally discover the certificates, obligations, shares and stocks.'

The pearl-merchant would not have discoursed in this strain if he could have suspected that the man behind the screen was the sole heir of Chamboulive, for he explained, unintentionally, what he had to do to save external assistance. These words did not fall into deaf ears, be sure. He only thought that Caradoc would be much wearied of matters not interesting him, and, as the tapestry moved, he assumed it was a token of restlessness in the bear-leader, whom he began to regret not having sent away earlier. The visitor felt the force of the argument based upon the facilities possessed by the heirs to enjoy the estate. He bit his lip, and sought for a peremptory response, still hoping to conclude an alliance with Chamboulive's late partner, whom he persisted in believing the depositary of the dead secret.

'I do not deny they might succeed,' said he; 'but it will take time, for the agencies protract the searches unless it is a contract by the case; and the police do not meddle readily in private matters. So we can beat them in speed, if you will consent to act with me.'

'My very wish, if I knew—what I don't. I repeat I am as ignorant as you of what Chamboulive did with his property.'

'Still, you accept my proposition in principle? In other words, if you find it you will associate with me for us to make money by it?'

'I am not saying no.'

'Then the bargain's made. There's the terms only to be regulated. Mine are: a third for you, for me, and for the heirs; from analogy with the scheme of our Government dividing treasure-trove into three equal parts, one for finder, one for owner of ground, and one for the State.'

'This is not at all the same thing. The law does not sanction arrangements like yours, and no notary public will seal such an act.'

'We will dispense with a notary. A private memo of agreement will fully suffice. Besides, give and take, you know! we will not hand over the papers without the money.'

'Are the heirs rich?'

'Why do you ask that?'

'Why, because if not they cannot pay us until after they can realise on the certificates. Hence, we must first hand them over, and if they were unfair, nothing would oblige them to keep their engagement.'

'I do not fear that. I know them, and can answer for their honesty.'

Bask-in-the-Sun, who had not lost a syllable of this edifying dialogue, ought to have been flattered by this valuation, uttered by the gentleman come to deal in the Chamboulive estate; but he was not touched by it, being engrossed in guessing who the person was. He thought he knew the voice, and yet he was not sure, and he dared not show himself for fear of vexing the merchant, who had so obligingly informed him about Baroda.

'You see,' continued the agent, 'we risk nothing, and nothing stays us from concluding our agreement.'

'It's selling the bear's skin before he is killed. I tell you for the third time that I do not know where the securities are.'

'My dear fellow, I begin to fear you are playing too cunningly with me. You're wrong. I am willing to allow you have not got them, for then you would make the deal with them straight, having no need of me. But you can hunt them up, and I can help you. Do you consent?'

'I would rather not commit myself just yet. We are only reasoning upon hypotheses now. We'll see hereafter, when you have certainty to go upon.'

'Is that your last word?'

'Yes, for the present.'

'Very well. I know what I have to do now. If, as I hope, I succeed without you, all the profit will be mine. But remember that I offered you a share, and you refused. Good-bye, my dear fellow; I am sorry I disturbed you.'

The visitor rose, and the pearl-dealer saw him to the door without speaking a word.

'Gone at last!' sighed Grippe-Soleil, tired of cooling his heels behind the tapestry.

This time the pearl-merchant shot the bolt. He did anything but praise himself for having let in this caller without sending Caradoc away, and he was bent on not being intruded upon again during his questioning the Singalese showman further.

His first care was to draw aside the curtain and bring out Bask-in-the-Sun, saying:

'Excuse me, my friend. If I had foreseen that talk would have run to such length, I should not have begged you to stay. Such is business—a man thinks something will take five minutes, and it swallows up three-quarters of an hour. You must have been sick of it, eh?'

'No, no, not too much so,' muttered the old soldier. 'I listened.'

'But what we said little interested you, I suppose. I only wish I could have eluded the rubbish that man overwhelmed me with; but he has been useful to me sometimes as an agent, and I yielded to hearing him. So much lost time, for there was no sense in his suggestions; he has the knack of making friends, but he did not mean business. Let us go back to the interview he interrupted so awkwardly. You were telling me that one of your friends, an officer, charged you to learn what became of Baroda.'

'Yes,' responded the other. 'But I fancy I recognised the voice of your caller, and I would like——'

'You must deceive yourself. That's a Parisian

—of the Bourse and the boulevards. Where the devil would you have met him—you, who spent your life at the antipodes?'

'That's true; but I lived in Paris when young.'

'And remember a voice all that time!' said the pearl-merchant. 'You must have wonderful hearing!'

'It was not only his voice struck me, but what he told you.'

'Oh, about the Chamboulive estate?—a cock-and-bull estate. The man thinks only of making money. He fancies a multitude of things in order to procure it, and takes his dreams for reality. I, who have known him a long while, attach no weight to his pretty speeches. To believe him, he has millions to gather in, and in the meantime he has not a penny.'

'But there was such a man as Chamboulive?'

'Certainly. An aged debauchee, who ran after the petticoats, and left his spare cash with or to some disreputable cat.'

'That would be extraordinary, if he were close and suspicious, as that gentleman said lately. You ought to know whether he was so or not, as you did business with him.'

'Oh, very seldom; and never sued for it. He was too rapacious. But, my dear Caradoc, in what way can these people interest you? Chamboulive was a usurer—the other brought him borrowers; and I am very sure that you never had business with such bloodsuckers. I was compelled to do it by my trade, as sometimes Chamboulive discounted bills given by jewellers in embarrassment, whom

I could not prosecute myself on non-payment, but he did to the uttermost. From that to being his partner, as that joker asserted, is a long step.'

'Assuredly. But tell me, is not this — this joker's name Charles Daubrac ?'

The honourable dealer in jewels would have probably replied in the negative if he had been prepared for the question ; but he was taken so abruptly that he could only falter :

'Ye-es, that's his name ; but how do you come to know him ?'

'I knew one Daubrac fifteen years ago ; he was under me in the Oran Spahis.'

'He ? Nonsense ! Soldiering is not one of his trades. You must confuse him with a namesake.'

'Not I ; I am sure of him. I "lost touch" of him, but I met him the other day at the Café du Helder.'

'How curious you should have come together again here ! But when you recognised his voice, why the mischief did you not come forward to renew the acquaintance ?'

'I was afraid of bothering you ; I preferred to wait for his ending his stories.'

'Yet you couldn't have been much entertained with them—about the heirs.'

'Oh, I know them. He spoke to me about them.'

'What ! to a man fresh from Tonkin, and not up in business matters ! He is a bigger stupid than I thought. Did he also propose to you to go into a company to work the Chamboulive inheritance ?'

'It came about by chance.'

'What do you mean by chance ?'

'I mean that it was I spoke to him first.'

The merchant started, and said to the old Spahi, whom he fixedly regarded :

'My dear Caradoc, I no longer follow you in what you say. Pray explain how you came to speak to Daubrac about this Chamboulive, of whose existence you should have been ignorant.'

'It is simple—very. The newspapers told of a rich man's death, whose heirs were not known, and whose fortune was so well hidden that none had found it. This appeared odd to me, and I chatted with Daubrac about it, as he is up to high-water mark in Paris news. He told me about the same as he did you—that his speciality was to find out the next-of-kin in intestate cases, and he was going to attend to this. He even added that he knew somebody who would help him—probably you ; but he did not name you.'

'Did he also tell you that he knew the heirs ?'

'Yes, yes ; and I am sure he did not lie !'

'Now, how can you be sure of that ?'

'Oh ! by his air and tone I saw he was telling the truth. Besides, what interest had he in inventing the tale for one whom it did not at all affect ? He told me it straight off the reel, like a man contented at finding a fat prize, who feels pleasure in acquainting a friend with his good luck.'

'So you were his friend—eh ?'

'I used to be ; and I was very glad to meet him in Paris, because I take him as a jolly fellow. We promised to keep up the acquaintance.'

'Will you tell him you overheard his conversation with me ?'

'Why not? there's nothing injurious to you or me in it; and, as I am totally out of the question, I will offer up my prayers that you two will make it up together, and get hold of the good thing.'

'There may be a means of getting you into it. If he names the heirs to you, you might point them out to me. I would manage the matter without him, and give you your share.'

The proposal was cynical, and Grippe-Soleil had no desire to accept it; but he had reasons not to formally reject it.

'Daubrac did not name them,' he said, shaking his head. 'He is more wary than you think; and if I question him on that point, he would distrust me and tell me no more. Besides, from what I overheard, you do not yet hold the warrants for the money.'

'I told Daubrac what it pleased me to say; but I know where they are, and can do without him in dealing directly with the heirs—if I knew them.'

The old soldier had only to say, 'I am the heir!' but he had a less theatrical idea, and merely replied:

'Well, when you hold the documents, I may be able to tell you the names, and then we can arrange. Let me know when, and, on my side, I'll keep you informed how things are going on.'

'Where do you live?'

'In the Rue de la Michodière, at the Providence Hotel. I took a room for the night when I was dismissed from the Jardin, and I have camped down there ever since. I will await your advices there. All I need do now is to thank you for your information about Baroda. I am tranquil since I know he is in England.'

'Oh, he will not set foot again in France. You can set your officer at ease about that. By the way, you have not told me his name.'

'And I cannot. He expressly advised me not to mix it up with this affair, and I promised him secrecy. Besides, his name would not teach you anything. We are all rid of Baroda, for I do not suppose you wanted much to keep him in Paris?'

'Oh, no!'

'Then all is for the best. We will talk about him when we meet again. The main point is that estate. Look out! and so will I, and we may make a pot of money out of it. Good-bye, my dear Carholt!' concluded Grippe-Soleil, holding out his hand to the pearl-merchant, who did not try to detain him now, for he felt it was useless. Our genial Indian was not satisfied, though he followed so many trades, and had charmed poor Thérèse into his cage. He had played this fresh game badly. But the old trooper went away enchanted.

Now he believed he could affirm to his captain that Baroda was in London, and that he was master of the situation in regard to the Chamboulive property, free to treat with that one of the two agents who would first show the titles.

CHAPTER XV.

THE ABSENT ARE ALWAYS WRONG.

Charles Daubrac had essayed coming to an understanding with John Carholt, because he hoped to have found him less stiff and more accommodating; but he was not very grief-stricken at unsuccess, for he, also, believed himself master of the situation, being the only one who knew Chamboulive's heir. He never suspected that this advantage was owing to Carodoc's prudence in not giving up his secret to Baroda's double-dealing friend. As Daubrac did not know anything of the Jardin d'Acclimatation incident and its consequences, he could not think of the snake-charmer, or of Thérèse, of whose existence he was ignorant, or even of the captain, whom he had not seen since he was given the rebuff at the Grand Hotel.

Daubrac had only one thing on his mind—to recover the demand notes for the Chamboulive estate funds, and he was strongly bent on doing so without the pearl merchant's assistance. Unburdened with punctilios, but honourable in his own way, he intended not to make Caradoc pay too dearly, which, with Carholt excluded from the enterprise, left a handsome fortune for both the Spahis of Oram. Daubrac was willing to be content with one million, for he had quelled some covetous inclinations to pretend the necessity to employ an intervener who wanted a share, in order to get two-thirds for himself. He acted on the principle set forth by Vautrin, in one of Balzac's novels, that the more scoundrelly a trade, the more relative probity must be in the practitioners of it.

All his hopes and calculations reposed on one person alone. He had spoken a few words about her to Corporal Bask-in-the-Sun; it was that Coralie, who had been one of the late Chamboulive's favourites, and he was pre-eminently one of her friends, or 'fellows,' as they say in the world of sensual delights. There the Paphians composing it divide men into two very distinct categories ; those whom they live upon and those who live with them. Daubrac belonged to the latter. There is still another class, the bullies, or Alphonses, who live upon them, and play an important part in high and low Lesbos. Daubrac was not one of these, and could not be qualified as a 'fancy man,' in the sense these ladies attach to the term, as that is but a variation of the professional Hector. The 'fancy' does not live on his mistress's presents, but in their personal pleasure parties it is not always he who foots the bills. Daubrac had not fallen so low. Greedy, but not avaricious, he earned money without looking too closely at the means, but he did not look at the money closely when he spent it, either. Amid the disreputable life he led, he had always preserved the bearing and semblance of a gentleman, not from calculation to inspire more confidence, but through taste and instinct. It may have been the effect of his short passage through the army, where, for want of perseverance, he had not made any progress ; but, for some reason or another, he had not badly borne himself. Therefore, as regards money, his behaviour towards women was correct. He was free with his coin, and did the thing handsomely when he gave the soiled doves of Venus a feast. But he never posed as a protector, and never prided himself on being jealous. It would have been hard to reproach him for this, considering what damsels he preferentially visited. Many persons of good standing practise the same philosophy without anyone carping, and this system has the great advantage of preserving those adopting it from being 'stuck on' one object—that scourge of Parisians who try to amuse themselves and get entangled with a harpy's claws.

Against this danger Charles Daubrac was iron-clad, plated, clad in full mail. Many fast women of divers degrees had tried to throw the grapnel at him, as he would have been a good catch, being good-looking, and in money often enough; but the skilfullest had lost their trouble. He never gave them more than the off-hours left by business, and when he was tired of them slipped away with eel-like suppleness; but this did not prevent them doing him a service afterwards when the occasion arose.

Virtue is its own reward, saith the wisdom of nations. This does not aptly suit Daubrac's case, as he had never been virtuous; but his cunning and caution had finally ensured him a place apart in the whirlpool of venial amours. The ladies held him to be a "good boy," and had no secrets from him; they freely consulted him on their business affairs, and he did not disdain giving them hints, which cost him nothing.

An unexpected emergency now presented itself for Daubrac to reap the reward of his disinterestedness and complaisant kindnesses. One of his little *fancies*, whom he had the most obliged, was in the position to render him a service of the first order; better to say—to make his fortune.

All Daubrac had said to Caradoc was true.

There was a genuine fund of friendship and gratitude for him in Coralie Bridaine, the light soprano, much better known under her first name than under the scarcely fashionable one due to the house-portress to whom she owed her life. She never looked for anything 'jollier' than to take him to a ball, or stand supper to him when she liked, and she hid nothing from him of her concerns. Hence she had amused him for a year at the least by relating the freaks of old Chamboulive, and peppering her tales with fresh details, each more hot than the foregoing, and none of pure invention by her. Daubrac found pleasure in it ; but he attached no importance to it until the day of learning that Chamboulive was Jean Caradoc's uncle.

Before that discovery, though, next day to that of the old millionaire-usurer's death, he had seen the possibility of making something out of Coralie's nocturnal visits to Chamboulive's secret dwelling to recover the disappeared fortune ; and he had mentioned it to her. The reckless girl had not taken the matter seriously. He had not been able to gather any useful clues, and he had let the subject drop, not seeing yet to whose profit he might attempt an expedition in search of the treasure.

The situation had completely changed in aspect since the happy concord established between his former corporal and himself on the terrace of the Helder café. He knew the old Spahi so well and relied so fully on his word that he had sought to see him again before setting to work. He had traced out a plan which consisted in applying, firstly, to John Carholt—known only to him as a dealer in pearls and discounter of bills, as well as the accomplice of the late M. Chamboulive and probable depository of a good portion of his secrets. It pained Daubrac to go under the claws of this dragon, presumptive guardian over the millions, but it was the shortest and simplest course—if Carholt could and would come into pair-harness.

The venture failed.

Daubrac had no way left but to operate by way of Coralie. He did not doubt he would arrange with her, but Coralie was not one of the steady-going, stay-at-home dames sure to be found at any fixed hour. She led the most fantastic life ever known; sometimes a-bed for whole days; more often up in the morning to go breakfast with some gentleman friend, or out a-boating at Asnières or Bougival; dining anywhere, and returning home when she found time. Her engagement at the Ambassadeurs' curbed her vagabond spirit a trifle, but twenty times during the season she would not appear, and her salary melted away in merited fines.

Nevertheless it was there, at evening, that Daubrac had most chances of seeing her; and, as it was after dark that she could be most useful to him, he dispensed with a call during the day in the Rue de Moscou, where she occupied a rather nice flat, comfortably furnished, some little through Chamboulive's liberality, for, before knowing that old liver in evil, Coralie did not roll on a bed of riches.

Daubrac earnestly hoped that she would not miss her call this evening, notwithstanding such fine weather as might induce the volatile beauty to flight into the country. He would not have doubted his finding her at her post if he had known that her rival, Térèsa, was to make her reappearance at the concert. But Daubrac was utterly unaware of the story of their rivalry, not being familiar with the gossip of the place; and Coralie had never spoken to him of the black-eyed blonde who had attracted away the public favour from her. He wanted to learn if Coralie would be free after the performance, but dared not rely upon that, for she did not pick and choose among the invitations which suited her; and his principle was never to disturb these women when fastened on a prey.

But he was eager to see her, any way; and on leaving the pearl merchant's he went to the central boulevard, where he dined at the Café Riche at as great length as possible. About half-past nine he strolled towards the Champs Elysées, for he had no need of hurry. Though he did not often treat himself to hearing his little pet sing, he remembered clearly that she usually gave two songs—one in the middle of the first part, and the other at the opening of the second. As he but poorly appreciated her talent, he did not care to be bored with both pieces. He only wanted to be there when she came on the stage for the second, and make her a signal which she would perfectly understand. Her answer would be a nod or a shake of the head, according to her being disengaged or otherwise, and he would act upon that pantomimic token. If she were not her own property that evening Daubrac would have to defer his expedition, but still would manage to speak a few words before she joined her cavalier *pro tem.*

He arrived between the acts, and was amazed to see the place crowded with people. Usually there is less of a throng late in the season. It was magnificent weather, it is true; but there must have been another cause for this unusual concourse. He was not slow to discover it on reading an enormous placard bearing the name 'TÉRÈSA' in foot-long letters. He did not at all know this musical prodigy whose first appearance this season was trumpeted; but he soon remarked that the audience and the staff of the establishment were agitated. The spectators thumped with their canes, the waiters raced around like madmen, and the orchestral musicians wandered about from one music-stand to another to chatter. Evidently there was some notable event in the air.

Not without trouble Daubrac managed to get into a stall on the right side of the stage—unoccupied because a tree-trunk half spoiled the view—and tranquilly awaited the explanation of the petty mystery much less busying him than the question whether Coralie would be free or not. Although he came rarely to the music-hall, he was known as being the friend of one of the singers; and he soon perceived that the servants nudged one another and looked at him whilst whispering. The flower-women smiled, although not coming up to offer their services, well knowing that he did not need them to enter into communication with Coralie. Bouquets are all very well for chance acquaintances to offer as declarations, but Daubrac had long ago got beyond that stage.

He noticed, besides, that he had come too soon, as the curtain was not up. He thought for an instant that he had better send a man he knew around to the stage-door to call her out, but then he feared that she might be dressing herself as a colonist to deliver her favourite song ; and he had decided to go out and smoke his cigar along the park avenue, when he saw half a dozen young gentlemen enter in a body, among whom he recognised that Baron du Teilleul who had dealt with him with such a high hand at the unfortunate presentation at the Grand Hotel. This party was ruddy of hue, as if from a hearty dinner ; and they all had the mien of men bent on a 'row.'

Daubrac had a rod in pickle for Du Teilleul, but he felt he was in no position to avenge the affront. If he sought a quarrel with this haughty lordling here, in the midst of his friends, he would again have the taunt cast up at him of the thirty thousand francs lent by Chamboulive, and the aggressor would not have the laughers on his side ; so he had to bottle up his wrath. He would have been wiser to go away, but he remained, with some dim hope that there would be a riot, and he might give the insolent baron a cut with his cane in the scuffle. He was as spiteful as a devil, and never doubted any evil might be expected ; and curiosity kept him to see what would happen.

For lack of vacant seats, the new-comers grouped themselves against the panelling of the wing of the stage running out beside the orchestra and under the stage-boxes: from their position they could see hardly more than the singers' skirts; but they were as in ambush, and evidently made ready to interrupt the performance. It was certainly not Coralie they were aiming at, Daubrac was quite easy as to that, for she had none but friends in every class, never having repulsed any admirer since she exhibited herself here. The plotters paid no attention to him, and he soon ceased to bother about them from spying a more interesting person. Seated in the first row facing the stage, he was not readily recognized by Daubrac, so greatly had he changed since their last and only interview at the Grand Hotel.

Octave de Parentis, pale and much thinned, carrying his right arm in a sling, seemed to have come here intending the *incognito*, for he wore a soft felt hat and had no ribbon of the Legion in his grey cutaway coat button-hole. Daubrac, who had not heard the result of the duel in which he had not been allowed as second, concluded that it had turned out badly for the captain; but he had more difficulty in divining why the scarcely convalescent officer should drag himself to the Ambassadeurs' Concert. Bask-in-the-Sun had not spoken of Thérèse, but confined himself to saying that M. de Parentis had quarrelled about a woman. This was enough for Daubrac to conjecture that the woman belonged to the same company as Coralie. Thus was explained the wounded man's presence, and perhaps that of Du Teilleul and his friends, to hiss the captain's *protégée*. Daubrac thought this intention in bad taste, particularly after the duel; but, as he did not want to praise either party, he promised to have a share of the fun if there were a tumult, and to learn from Coralie, after the performance, more about the person who set the stylish club-members by the ears.

The truth was that, after having passed through cruel anguish and lengthy hesitation, Octave de Parentis had resolved to see her renewed appearance at the music-hall where she had engaged herself on the very evening of her widowhood. He was indignant at the step she took without consulting him, and was not prone to forgive her, however deeply she was enrooted in his heart. Pride prevented him writing for an explanation of her conduct, but he wished to see with his own eyes the appearance that disgusted him, hear the applause and hisses, and enjoy the sight of the voluntary abasement to which the woman whom he dreamt of marrying had doomed herself. This would be his vengeance, and, mayhap, also the means of tearing a love unworthy of him out of his bosom.

He came alone, disguised, and with no desire to question the flower-women. But, as he wanted to drain the bitter chalice to the dregs, he had taken a front row stall—so close he could read the traitress's face, and perhaps unravel the impulse to which she had yielded. No doubt she would recognize him among the lookers-on, and he would see whether she had a brow that never blushed or not. He did not perceive the Baron du Teilleul or his friends, or Daubrac, and, had he done so, he would not have heeded their presence, all being indifferent in the present state of things, save his fixed idea, Thérèse Tercier.

He had only just arrived. He had not addressed his neighbours, and he did not notice what went on around him, not even the busy air of the servants, nor the disappearances and returns of the *chef d'orchestre*, who, instead of climbing to his seat, flitted about and conferred with his first violin. The audience was not so noisy as on the previous Saturday, but anyone could see that the star was impatiently awaited whose name was announced on a panel, these panels with the performers' names and the song to be sung being drawn out and inserted in a frame at the side of the stage, to dispense with a chairman calling them out. This star was Thérèse—bound to appear when the curtain went up ; it could not be much longer delayed.

Suddenly, without the orchestra playing a note, and without any other notification than the three raps with a stick which, in continental theatres, take the place of a peal of the prompter's bell, the curtain rose and the stage manager, whom Parentis had seen once before, came forward to say, in a loud voice and without any oratorical prelude :

'Ladies and gentlemen, the *artiste* whom the management engaged on Saturday last to gratify the public wish, Mdlle. Térèsa, has not come this evening, in contempt of her duties, and has not even sent in an excuse. She herself, therefore, has broken her engagement, and she will never be allowed to appear again on this stage.'

An outburst of clamour might have been expected. There was nothing of the sort ; a few

'Oh's' and 'Ah's,' some groans, two or three hisses from different points, and that was all. It was clear that the public little cared about Térèsa, and that the foregoing Saturday's turbulence was purely the work of Savinien de Coulibœuf and his clique. The manager had been gulled by it, but it had not cost him dear, as the singer had cancelled her engagement by breaking her word. Nobody was disappointed except the gilded youth, with Baron du Teilleul at the head, who had gathered to hoot her.

But Octave de Parentis fell from his altitude.

What did Thérèse's absence imply? Why had she altered her resolution? Already he blamed himself for accusing her too quickly, and he was ready to believe that, affected by scruples at the last moment, she had definitely renounced a return to the boards. What ought she to think of the man who had curtly thrown her over? All the wrongs were upon his shoulders, since he had condemned her without a hearing on the gossip of a bouquet-girl and the proclamation given one evening to quell a public disturbance. He had withdrawn himself without sending her farewell by one word. What mattered his having fought for her when he took care she should not know it? He had forbidden Grippe-Soleil seeing her.

Could she have divined what was happening, would she not have flown to him on hearing he was wounded?

For what crime had he cursed her so pitilessly? For having yielded to an impulse speedily regretted, inasmuch as she would not reappear at the music-hall where she had hot-headedly re-engaged—perhaps out of bravado, for the pleasure of overcoming a prejudice. He had been harsh and unjust, and he ought to go and ask her forgiveness.

But where would he find her, now?

What had become of her between two hasty acts—so contrary? the engagement made and broken promptly.

'I shall learn to-morrow,' said the repentant captain inwardly, 'when I present myself as a suppliant to her; and if, as I expect, she only has an unthinking step to reproach me for, I shall beg her pardon for suspecting her. I shall obtain it, too, when she knows that I received a sword-thrust for taking up her defence against a fool who insulted her!'

Meanwhile, the captain had no business in this place, where he would not see Thérèse. The curtain had been dropped. The name of the singer had been changed, the musicians were tuning up, and the performances would go on after a forgotten interruption.

Parentis rose, and made his way towards the choked-up entrance. He had carefully pulled his hat down on his brow, and he hoped to pass unnoticed, clothed as he was, although suspecting that the promise of the singer's return would have brought persons of his acquaintance. He succeeded, but at cost of a more cruel meeting than with one of the pretty gentlemen whom he wished to avoid face to face.

In the small nook between the stage and the egress-barrier, he was caught in a press formed around a flower-seller, whom several fops were questioning all at once. As he could not stop his ears, he had to hear some such scraps as these:

'I'll take my Bible-oath, messieurs, that nobody here can make it out! She came to rehearsal yesterday, and was cocky about making a tremendous hit!'

'Perhaps she's ill?'

'No! At half-past eight, when she had not come, we sent one of our people to her place, on the Boulevard Beaumarchais, and she was not at home. Her house-porter said she had not come over-night.'

'You'll see it's an elopement!'

'That's possible,' said the flower-woman; 'but it's not my idea of it. I am afraid something bad has happened to her.'

'And an elopement could not be a bad thing for her,' sneered a masher.

These sentences were so many dagger-stabs to Parentis's heart, as he lost not a word of the talk, in spite of himself. The persons against whom he was squeezed seemed to find pleasure in rending away his last illusions.

Thus he learned that Thérèse had not retired from a hasty step, regretted next day. Oh, no! for she had rehearsed daily with exemplary assiduity. And her not being seen since the night before hardly was from her being detained anywhere by force. Thérèse was kept off the stage by some lover who objected to it. As if this was not enough for the poor captain, Savinien de Coulibœuf must needs deal him the finishing stroke, unwittingly, for he did not see him, by saying:

'I know where the black-eyed blonde is. At six, yesterday afternoon, I saw her in a carriage with an elderly party before the Madeleine. This pure little dove, who went about in an orange-blossom wreath last Saturday, is in keeping, my boys! What the cream of the joke is, that I fancy I can tell him now!—it's a rogue who works with the usurer Chamboulive, the one who skinned you alive, my little Du Teilleul!'

Octave would hear no more. He could have strangled them all, beginning with his cousin; but, instead of flying at them, he burst away through the mob like a wild boar through a thicket, at risk of re-opening his wound, and, running out of the music-hall grounds, he disappeared under the park trees. There was such a throng that nobody remarked the flight save Daubrac, who had not lost sight of the captain. He guessed why he departed so swiftly.

It was evidently for this Térèsa that Captain de Parentis had 'gone out.' Daubrac cared little about her, but still he determined to ask Coralie. Whilst awaiting a confabulation with her, he treasured up one clue, caught on the bound, so to say. He also had heard Couliboeuf, a stranger to him, tell the other swells how he had met the singer in a carriage with 'Chamboulive's partner.' This could only be John Carholt; yet this estimable dealer in precious stones had never shown himself to Daubrac under the guise of a sultan. How could he have been seen parading himself in his carriage with a music-hall diva, not likely to be more virtuous than most of her sisters?

There lay a mystery in this which did not directly concern Daubrac, but he made up his mind to unravel it just the same. Carholt now was an enemy, since he had refused to agree with Daubrac about the inheritance; and it is always wise to know your enemy thoroughly.

CHAPTER XVI.

CHAMBOULIVE'S PARTICULAR FRIEND.

THE second part of the entertainment commenced, and the Baron du Teilleul and his coterie had disappeared. Daubrac had nothing to do but await Coralie's entrance. The programme announced her as third to come, with one song, and then she would be off for the night. She succeeded a popular comic singer, and she was well received, as usual. The public relished her, and she had so many personal friends among the regular comers that she never feared organized opposition. Only exclusive ladies are caballed against; and Coralie was as much as possible not exclusive. At need, she would have found numerous defenders, because she had discontented nobody.

Thérèse, who would accept no addresses, had none but enemies. Two men had loved her since she went on the stage: one she loved, and the other she had desired to love, and love alone. The first had died miserably, just after she had resigned herself to wedding him, and consecrating her life to making him happy. The second, who adored her, and had made a profound impression on her, vowed now to see her no more, and had already forced himself to forget her.

And, as though everything conspired against her, Grippe-Soleil, the honest fellow who had been at first touched by the poor woman's miseries, and who sorrowed after fifteen years for having cast off a woman whom he was now seeking in order to repair his crime—he, too, had gone over into the ranks of Thérèse's foes. He did not try to injure her; he had, for that matter, taken a step with the intention of carrying her succour in case she was menaced with falling into the dreadful Baroda's power. But his move had no result; and, besides, he had only made it to regain his captain's good graces. He was not disposed to enter upon a campaign for an orphan whose misfortunes did not at all affect him. If he had known what the captain had just learnt, he would have cursed her.

Daubrac stood neutral. He did not trouble his head about her; and if his mind had dwelt for an instant on the event pointed out by Coulibœuf, it was simply because he hoped that his knowledge of the old man's infatuation would perhaps give him a hold over him. Daubrac thought of Coralie alone, and lost no time, as soon as she was on the stage, to get into communication with her. He glided along the imitation marble wall beside the orchestra, until he reached it, where, standing up, he was plainly in sight, so that Coralie could not miss seeing him. She was still making languishing eyes at the audience, who were applauding her entrance, and did not perceive him at once.

She fairly beamed; never had she been in brighter beauty or better voice. Thérèse's disappearance had a good deal to do with this. She was, in any case, an appetizing creature, quite tall enough, well developed without grossness, and not lacking some artistic instinct ; she gave out the telling word wonderfully aptly, and emphasized the nasty *double entendres* as cunningly as more notorious rivals. She was neither a fool, nor conceited, nor even bad-hearted. Pretty ? yea and nay. She had large brown eyes, splendid teeth, a mouth too large, and a nose slightly tip-tilted, all carried off with a jolly and saucy air which pleased all men. In her set they said she had 'go ;' in the eighteenth century they would have said she was possessed of the devil, and it was true.

At the prelude to her song she perceived Charles Daubrac, and her beaming face flamed up. Daubrac saw at once that he had hit on an auspicious moment, and lost no time in making her a sign which she perfectly comprehended, for she instantly responded with a peculiar wink. She had no parallel for using her eyes towards her private friends. Without speaking she let them know all that was desirable, and the public only saw lively glances. These varied and repeated ones to 'her little Charles,' as she styled him, meant to say, 'Wait for me ; I shall be out in an instant.' This was just what Daubrac wished, as he did not care for the rest of the concert, and needed time to take away the hare-brained woman to allure her into his ideas, and to second his projects of a nocturnal expedition. He knew she would not keep him waiting. Expeditious in everything, Coralie could change her dress in a quarter of an hour when she had to go to a pleasure ; and this was the case.

Enchanted though he was at taking her away, Daubrac preferred she should not accost him before those who might recognise him; for she never hampered herself about speaking out loudly, and he feared her uttering some noisy salutation which would draw attention upon him. Hence he gradually worked his way towards the egress, without losing sight of the low stage-door out of which she would soon have to come. She arrived armed for war, which is saying she was in a showy costume, and was so arrayed intentionally. She must have formed the design of spending the night hilariously, and there would have been no lack of cavaliers if Daubrac had not been at hand.

'You have dropped on me to rights,' screamed she from as far as she spied him. 'I say,' she added, though he tried to wave her into silence as she ran to hook on his arm, 'I do so want a kick-up to-night. That's your idea, ain't it?'

'Anything you like. I came expressly to ask you out for supper.'

'Count me on the job; but not yet. I am not hungry enough. Take me to the Jardin de Paris first—this is the swell night, and I want to show my new dress there.'

'It's a go for the Jardin!' said Daubrac, resigned beforehand to accept some burdens to arrive at his goal. 'We'll see *La Goulue* dance, which will help sharpen your appetite.'

'Oh, we shan't go to seed there! Three times round the promenade to make the girls jealous—oh, if that nun Térèsa were there, what a streak of luck it would be!'

'Who's Térèsa?' queried Daubrac, feigning not to know the name.

'Don't you know? Then you wouldn't, not being a regular lounger at the Ambassadeurs. I was speaking of the immaculate lily who was "billed" to come back to-night, and never turned up her nose.'

'Right! I heard the man on the stage say something about her. She does not seem a friend of yours.'

'I hate her, and I think it's the same with her to me.'

'What's the row?'

'Oh, nothing! She married a fool who was after me, but I wouldn't have him. He died on his wedding-day on the Bois de Boulogne, bitten by a snake. You must have read the story in the papers.'

Indeed, Daubrac had read it, but he had not known the absentee vocalist played a part in it, and Coralie, by informing him so, opened new horizons to him.

'They were saying around about me that an old gentleman had run away with her yesterday,' said he.

'Run away with!—pooh!—she went only too willingly. Our flower-woman told me the story. The old party came here yesterday while Térèsa was rehearsing, and put a lot of questions about her. When he got them he went and laid in wait under the trees; he followed her when she came out, spoke to her over by the waterside, and said—I don't know what, but I do know that she stepped into his carriage without much pressure. The "eloping" did not take long.'

'Did you see the old gent?'

'No, I came when he was going; but the flower-woman kept her eye on him, and is sure they went off together in a carriage.'

'She wasn't wrong. They were seen a little after in front of the Madeleine. The funny thing is that the serious old party is the friend of Chamboulive.'

'Nonsense! Chamboulive had no friends.'

'I mean to say business friend. He's a dealer in pearls and diamonds, named Carholt.'

'Not known here,' said Coralie tersely.

'But I know him. I can understand your never having seen him, for Chamboulive did not ask him to the junketings he gave.'

'He never invited anybody but me, and not regularly, because I did not find sport in his orgies. To see Chamboulive play the Grank Turk among half-a-dozen lights of the harem picked up in the working quarters was not comic at all to me.'

'But you went all the same,' said Daubrac, laughing.

'Rather! You see, old boy, it paid me well, and, whether you believe me or not—fair play even to yours truly—I only looked on, nothing more; and wore a mask, so that if these beasts met me they would not know me.'

'You took a wise precaution; Chamboulive was a lunatic.'

'Not more than many other old debauchés. He was cracked on one subject, and that was to play the big bashaw when in his retreat, because he had so long been poverty-stricken. I can't say I had anything to complain of, and I own I regret him. I've lost heavily in losing him.'

'Less than you believe, maybe.'

'How so, little Charles? I can't suppose you cherish the intention of replacing him in a financial point of view.'

'In no point of view, darling. But I have come for you this evening to talk a little about him.'

'That's not polite! Here was I imagining you were dying to make merry with your little Coralie.'

'We will make merry all the same.'

'All right, then! none too soon, either, for you have been giving me the cold shoulder of late. I never see you, in fact, and began to believe you had had enough of me.'

'Never in my life! but I must attend to business, you see, for my parents forgot to leave me an income, and I am not a man of millions.'

'And a good job, too! you would be unbearable if you had millions, and I like you better as you are. Pocket-money, my pet, that's all a fellow wants—and, as you have that——'

'Well, I have to earn that, too, but I have a splendid opportunity to get some, in which you can aid me.'

'You don't say so! it's my dearest wish. What must I do?'

'I will tell you over supper. I suppose you are quite free to-night?'

'Completely—and glad I am so, if I can do you a service.'

'You are a love of a little woman, and I shall make it up to you for that sooner than you think. Let me tell you that it may depend on you—the gaining a very pretty sum to-night—in which you shall have your share.'

'To-night?' said Coralie, bursting out in laughter. 'At the Jardin de Paris, and over supper?'

'No, afterwards.'

'I should think so. But you can tell me what it is all about at once.'

'It would take too long. I would rather make it a pleasant surprise to you over the walnuts and the wine.'

Daubrac and the singer were thus conversing as they walked up towards the Jardin de Paris, its illuminations being perceptible already. Without adequately replacing it, this open-air entertainment succeeds that Jardin Mabille which delighted the men about town during forty years, its historic sandy dancing-ground trodden by five or six generations of dancers and revellers, and the whole sung by Nadaud the rhymester. It is no more than a legendary memory like the Tivoli, where the *Merveilleuses* of the Directory skipped and gyrated. The Jardin de Paris is a more luxurious and more complicated establishment, full of varied attractions. Female acrobats and Tunisian bayaderes are exhibited, as remarkable for bulk as for beauty. Dancing is represented simply by an ultra-*naturalistic* quadrille. The main charm is the all-round promenade; once, families used to come here to listen to classical music, and conclude serious matrimonial matches in the lower middle-class. Now *the* promenade is the tour of the Lake in the electric light, the meet of Jezebels, known and unknown by their market price, and particularly of 'the fleeting show-ladies' so well named in the slang of men of pleasure.

Coralie never failed to put in an appearance here after her performance, and did not waste her time by so doing. Daubrac had met her here frequently, but this was the first time he had escorted her, and, as he had punctilios, he did not give her his arm until they got past the ticket-taking place. It was enough for him that they should meet at the entrance, and he had said enough to feel assured that she would not fail him at the critical juncture. So they parted, and he went to sit at a café-table to smoke a cigar philosophically, whilst she prowled about on the walk encumbered with women on the prowl likewise. She did not pass unperceived.

All the curled darlings had come here from the Ambassadeurs'; and they accosted her at the first circuit, headed by Coulibœuf, inebriated as usual, or rather more than usual.

Baron du Teilleul was not of the number, and consequently, without figuring ignominiously, Daubrac could overlook the attentions of Coulibœuf, who did not know him by sight. Daubrac was not sorry that the young coxcomb was speaking with Coralie, as he conjectured the subject would be that Térèsa who had made the conquest of M. de Parentis. In this was a mystery which our schemer longed to elucidate since he had heard of John Carholt abducting the vanished cantatrice. Never did Daubrac neglect trifles, and he deemed it useful to know about the side issues of the situation, although he had no other aim than to lay hand on the Chamboulive estate. It was important to learn whether the captain might not spoil his game.

Lovers are terrible, because they rush onward; and Daubrac had more to dread from this one as he did not see the moves and the men clearly on the board.

Savinien, utterly broken off from his cousin, had no reason to be delicate as regarded him, and he did not halt before regaling Coralie Bridaine with her rival's recent adventures. Partly she knew them, but was still overjoyed to learn the story of the snake-charmer falling in love with the bride, and she returned the compliment by informing him of what he knew already, namely, the spiriting away of the sly puss by an old money-lender. On this interesting topic they descanted at length, and departed, both most satisfied.

Through politeness and for form's sake, the gentleman had invited her to supper, but had not insisted when she declined. After him came others — acquaintances made at the music-hall, whose offers were no better received. Without betraying it, she had been excited by her old friend Daubrac's rather vague hints, and was eager to know what he was driving at. It was not solely through curiosity she yearned for full information. Somewhere it is written that there is exaltation in the most prosaic beings:

> 'The poet-bloom falls off when manhood-fruit survives.'

It is just the other way in woman. Under the apparently most airy, there is always a positive woman.

Our careless Coralie, who lived from hand to mouth, the reveller in full swing, was without her own knowledge doubled by a woman of business, who only wanted an opening to give rein to her natural instinct.

Perhaps this was one of the grounds of her attention towards Daubrac—an unconscious affinity. She admired his boldness and diplomacy; she considered him a superior man, and sometimes she had said they were born for one another.

Daubrac had never puzzled out how she could serve him beyond the pleasure her company afforded when he sought to be amused, and only an exceptional occurrence made him think to utilize the good-will and intelligence of this free and easy thing. He was not even yet decided to let her completely into his great project, and he would have preferred not to show her any of the cards; but he foresaw this would be most difficult. So he resigned himself in advance to hide nothing from her, if this had to be done to ensure her co-operation. In any case, he was firmly resolved to attempt that very night to discover the Chamboulive securities.

Why should he delay? That would be augmenting his chances of unsuccess, for Carholt, being warned, might outstrip him in speed, and Coralie might blab. He had her under his hand without her yet suspecting what he expected of her; better, therefore, to profit by a chance that would not be soon repeated.

Besides, Coralie would wish to end the suspense as quickly as possible from his having put her on tenter-hooks.

She came to meet him, having produced the desired sensation on her acquaintances of both sexes; and she began by stating she was hungry.

'Where shall we sup?' she wanted to know. 'What do you say to Le Doyen's? it's only a step or two.'

'Yes; but too long a step to where we are going afterwards.'

'Where would you like to go?'

'You shall see. Meanwhile, I propose going straight to the Café Américain.'

'A private room? Thanks! Chamboulive took me there once, and it was precious slow.'

'But I am not a Chamboulive; and besides, we can have supper in the grand saloon on the first floor.'

'I like that better. Private rooms are no good except for men of reputation. You have no need to cloak yourself. Still, don't you know, for the surprise to be made me at dessert, it will be fitter to be by ourselves.'

'We will manage to get a corner in the large room. The restaurant does not pack up until two o'clock, and I hope we shall be on the road before then.'

'On the road? Oh, yes—the night journey. You make my mouth water.'

'You are ready to march?'

'To the end of the world, with you.'

'It's not my intention to lead you so far,' replied Daubrac, smiling.

'Wherever you like, my own Charles. But let's step it! I don't dine hearty, because I have to be in good voice; and I do so want some soup. And I am bored here; the people going round and round worry me to death.'

Daubrac hastened to put this fortuitous inclination to advantage. He drew away Coralie, who hung on his arm with an *abandon* with which he would have willingly dispensed; and leaving the gardens, they stepped into a victoria. It took them to the Boulevard des Capucines, and set them down at the door of the Café Américain. It was not without motive that Daubrac selected this late house as the starting-point of his quest. He had thought of this establishment as one near enough to the northern rising ground, where he supposed Chamboulive's abode of mystery to be. A word dropped by Coralie had fortified him in this choice, when she affirmed to having come to the Américain for supper with the old usurer, who had taken her thence to his secret house. Daubrac reasoned that she ought to find it by starting from the same place.

The couple went up to the first floor, where, as they anticipated, they found the grand saloon almost empty—an excellent state of things for talking serious business over a bottle of champagne. The gentleman called for two of the best, knowing that Clicquot would unloosen Coralie's tongue; and he was not sorry himself to gather strength and cheer up before playing the heavy stake.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE UNEXPECTED BARRIER.

THE supper began merrily, and Daubrac did not hasten to broach the interesting question, wishing the lady to be at the right stage; but he was not long seeing that she was on her guard, whilst drinking fair. Supper practice had taught him to keep the bottle going, and there was no danger that she would get really drunk. He brought the conversation round upon Chamboulive without difficulty, and spoke of the nocturnal festivals presided over by the old maniac, dwelling upon incidents he knew in order to spur Coralie into giving fresh ones. But she did not yield to pressure, as we say familiarly, and finally exclaimed :

'Whatever pleasure can you take in dragging up the tale of that hoary old beast's freaks? I have told you them a hundred times, and I am not going to invent any new ones to entertain you. Now look here, little Charles,' she resumed, as he came round to the same subject by a circuit, and she laughed, 'do have done with dancing round the mulberry-bush. I am no bigger fool than others, and I see plain that the affair you spoke of relates to Chamboulive. Out with it square, and if I can be of use in any way, I am ready to do what you wish. But—fire away !'

'Here you are, then,' said Daubrac, taking his course. 'Chamboulive had about four millions of francs, and nobody knows what he did with them.'

'The old shark never left them to me !'

'Worse luck! But they are somewhere; and if I knew where——'

'What good would it do you? You are not his heir.'

'No; but I know who is, and if I could get hold of the property, I might sell it him.'

'Oh, my blessed! that's an idea! But I do not see how I can help you on with it.'

'We can work it together on halves, or, at least, you can have your share—a liberal one.'

'That will suit me, my little Charles! Still I do not comprehend what I can do for you.'

'Listen, and at once you will. Chamboulive resided in the house where he carried on such games with you and others.'

'You mean, he slept there; for he was never there in the daytime.'

'I know that. He received his customers in the rue Milton. But neither there nor at the Grand Hotel, where he had rooms, has anything been found. Consequently, he hid his money in the house aforesaid.'

'I never thought of it, but I am rather inclined to believe so.'

'Then we've nothing to do but discover the pirate's lair.'

'And you reckon on me to point it out?'

'Naturally.'

'As a matter of course, the task fits me like a glove; but I give you my word that I do not know where it is. I have gone there more than once along of Chamboulive; but I am incapable of going there without him.'

'Nothing prevents your trying it with me,' said Daubrac.

'I am willing,' responded Coralie; 'but I warn you we shall not succeed. I have told you twenty times how it was done. Generally old Cham. commenced by taking me to supper at one restaurant or another, and trying to make me tight—in which he often enough succeeded. About one o'clock in the morning he would have a cab called, and get me in with him, and we would get out on the Boulevard de Clichy—not far from the square where there stands a statue. I remember this well.'

'Would you recognise the spot?'

'Perhaps; but I would have a lot of trouble following the road further on. I remember his making me go up streets running along the walls of the Montmartre Cemetery. I was awfully scared, and it amused the old monster.'

'Good! Next?'

'Next, we went down on the other side of the hill, by breakneck streets—dreadful in the night-time. There were street lamps—more than there were houses; and you may readily imagine that I did not entertain myself by reading the names of the streets on the corner plates.'

'More's the pity; but go on.'

'And I never thought, either, to imitate Hop-o'-my-Thumb, who strewed pebbles in the woods to mark his road. I did not fear the ogre, and knew that all those tricks to keep it dark were only the old donkey's whims. I even chaffed Chamboulive about them, and he let me, for, to tell the truth, he was more cranky than wicked.'

'In short, you arrived somewhere?'

'Just so; after a full hour's random walking. I wonder why he kept us this exercise to play the bashaw in his harem. Every time I vowed I'd never be dragged uphill and down dale in that style again; but, bless you! I went through it all the same, to earn a thousand-franc note which the old Solomon put in my purse in the morning; for he had this good feature, that he never looked at money when it was to gratify his freaks.'

'You ought to remember his house.'

'So I do, perfectly well, inside. If you wish, I'd give you a description of all the rooms. There was one very large one, and three or four small, all opening into the big one, which was furnished in the Oriental style—sofas all over the shop; no stairs, for the building had only one storey, and no windows.'

'What, no windows! How did you get the light?'

'Through the roof, probably; but as I only went in at night, I always saw the place by candle-light.'

'Right; but outside?'

'Nothing but a wall at the end of a blind alley.'

'But there was a door in the wall?'

'So well hidden that I never saw it. It opened when Cham. put his hand on it, and I dare say it was a secret known to himself alone.'

'How did the other women get in?'

'I know nothing about them. They were always in the large room when we arrived—dressed like Turks, Greeks, Arabs, and the like—and, as I never spoke to them, I did not ask them whence they came, and how they were brought in.'

'But, hang it all! there must have been servants—negroes or negresses?'

'Not a soul, old fellow!'

'Then the house would look after itself when Chamboulive was not there? I can't swallow that!'

'I don't believe so either; but I can only tell you what I have seen. I need not describe the capers I saw cut up—masked, as I stated?'

'Oh! that's useless. Now, how was the return managed?'

'About the same way, but not on the same side. After two or three hours, at most, I was put out before daybreak.'

'What, even in summer?'

'The fun began sooner then; and it was always dark when Chamboulive saw me out—always my conductor, and always on foot. What a character the old boy was! He made me go out the same door and the same alley, but, instead of climbing up the hill, he took me off by straight streets.'

'You must be able to tell some of them.'

'I did not pay any attention, and I have never frequented that part of the town. I fancy I once noticed the Rue Marcadet, and I believe we walked along the side of La Chapelle. At the end we came out upon the Rochechouart Boulevard, where we would find a cab, into which we got, so that Chamboulive could drop me at my house in the Rue de Moscou, and go away in the cab. There you are, my child! I have told the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth! but you are not much the forwarder. Still, my knowledge-box is empty, and I have no more to teach you.'

'Two or three questions farther, and it will be over. How did those girls go away after the tomfoolery was finished?'

'Don't know a bit. I never saw them depart any more than I did see them arrive. They were there when I came, and there when the old man walked me out. I have sometimes fancied they lived there. I remember saying as much to Chamboulive, who laughed in my face, but gave no explanation.'

'I can guess it. The house has two entrances, or it's a double house. I mean that it communicates with one in another street, tenanted by hirelings of Chamboulive.'

'That's likely; but the puzzle is to know where it is.'

'I undertake to find it, if you can manage to show me the door you went through. Now, again picture to me the interior arrangements of the Chamboulive seraglio. You spoke of a large room furnished in the Turkish fashion. Let's hear about the rest. I suppose there was a dining-room?'

'One where no dining went on. By way of supper, Cham. offered his odalisques rum and brandy.'

'You told me you saw a library.'

'Yes; two or three book-cases full of albums and picture-books—horrors that would make a stone man blush.'

'Yes, I know. And the sleeping-chamber? Was that for mere show, like the dining-room?'

'Not exactly. The old ogre used it; his slippers would be at the foot of the bed—a big one with a canopy, bought a bargain at some auction sale.

He kept his change of clothes there in clothes-presses; he had a dressing-table in wretched condition, for Chamboulive was not very particular about his person. However, I am sure he lived in the place; and must have had somebody to wait upon him, for all was in order and the bed carefully made.'

'Things are as I supposed. There must have been a coffer—a strong box.'

'I never saw it. Sometimes I bantered him about where he kept his savings; but he always answered that he never kept ready money for fear of burglars. He might have said pickpockets—female ones, I mean—for the minxes he received were quite capable of plundering him. But he had an eye like an eagle——'

'Besides they could not have made anything by it, for he held certificates and the like, payable only to the person named on the scrip.'

'Then these are the papers you want to find to sell them to the heir?'

'Just so. I am going to sell them dearly, too—for he left four millions, at the lowest figure.'

'Good! I understand.'

'And also that this little operation, if I pull it off, will make my fortune at one stroke—and yours, too. You can fix your own share.'

'Oh, I'll leave it to your generosity. But, tell me, cannot the police come down on us if we take papers that do not belong to us?'

'Yes; if we take to keep. But if I can get them, I shall be in the utmost hurry to hand them over to the lawful owner—the nephew of Chamboulive, an honest fellow, whom I know.'

'Did Chamboulive have a nephew? I never dreamt of that.'

'Nor I. But it's so. The nephew exists and has all the proofs, and his right to the estate is incontestable.'

'Do you believe he will consent to share?'

'I am sure of it. I have come to an agreement with him to be given one-third of the property which, without me, would moulder away in its chest, and out of that third there will be a rich slice for my little Coralie.'

'Hurrah! It will come in handy, for I lost a good deal in losing Chamboulive, and if I get a recompense out of him after his death, I shall bless his memory.'

'So you shall, darling! I cherish the hope. And this night we shall attempt the adventure.'

'To-night! oh, the mischief! I am in no condition for walking. That champagne has gotten into my toes.'

'The open air will set you up.'

'Then do you mean we are to go hunting up that house?'

'Naturally.'

'I cannot answer for our finding it; but if we do—what then?'

'We will try to get in. You told me there was some secret means of opening the door. We shall find it by perseverance.'

'I doubt it. And, then again, the house may be tenanted.'

'We shall see.'

'And the people will take us for robbers and shoot at us.'

'Never! Anyhow, nothing venture, nothing win. If you are afraid, I'll go in alone.'

'Thank you for nothing! I should be more afraid if left alone outside. After all, I went in with Chamboulive, who could have wrung my neck if he had wanted to. I will go in with you, who only want to enrich me.'

'Yes, my little Cora—greatly enrich you,' emphasized Daubrac. 'You would no longer have to flash about, and might retire into the country, if you took a fancy that way.'

'Thanks! but I have ten long years before me for fun, and do not want to plant my cabbages prematurely,' exclaimed Mdlle. Bridaine. 'Still I have a longing to have money in the Funds. And since you want to carry out this affair this very night, let's be off. I am ready.'

'That's something like speaking! it is the hour to strike the blow. They are beginning to swarm above and around us, and the streets are getting lonely. I'll call for the bill, and we'll step out.'

'Whenever you like.'

The light soprano doubted nothing, since she saw fortune down the vista; and 'her little Charles' inspired her with absolute confidence. He settled the charges, and they found an open carriage on the boulevard. The passengers who saw them get in and go up the Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin, took them for a pair of turtle-doves, flying up to the Cytherean nests of the Breda quarter; little did they suspect it was rather a new Jason and a shipmate setting sail to conquer the Golden Fleece. Theirs was a less perilous errand than the Argonauts', but was not less bristling with all sorts of obstacles—the foremost being to find Chamboulive's residence. The end, too, might not be without danger; but Daubrac was no coward, and he had resolved to stand the hazard of the die. He stopped the victoria on the Boulevard de Clichy, near the Place Moncey, and, after having paid and discharged the cabman, said to his pilot:

'Now, dear one, you take command, and I follow. Try to hit on your road. Is it really here that you used to alight with Chamboulive?'

'Yes; my next point to make for is the Montmartre Cemetery, which cannot be far.'

'I can see the mouth of the avenue leading up to it.'

'So do I recognise it. Good! It seems to me I can remember we kept it on the right hand.'

'Humph! Now I thought just the contrary; but, I repeat, you conduct the operations.'

'Then, come this way,' went on Coralie. 'If wrong I shall soon find it out, and we will only have to retrace our steps.'

This programme was not very promising; but Daubrac, having none better to propose, decided to grin and bear it. He knew this part of the town pretty well, and meant to rectify Coralie's errors on the road as committed; but he was much in the same position as a lost traveller, obliged to trust to the instinct of his horse.

The boulevard, once the outwardmost of Paris, runs to the east, till out of sight, towards La Chapelle and La Villette. This populous thoroughfare is much frequented in the evening, but after midnight there are fewer wayfarers than nocturnal attacks, and it was now one in the morning. A little to the left, in front, opened up a street, bordered by timber-yards, even more deserted than the boulevard. Into this uninviting street Coralie plunged, followed by her cavalier, who took care to look at the tablet, where he read a name derived from the governmental geography of the First Empire: 'Rue des Deux-Nèthes,' in memory of a county of France, ceasing to belong to it some sixty years since. A hundred steps farther the woman turned to the right into another way, entitled the Rue Ganneron, making the circuit of the burying-ground, enclosed here by a high wall, at right angles to the Rue de Maistre. Daubrac did not puzzle himself about the meaning of this odd medley of nomenclature in a nook of old Paris; he only got them by heart in prevision of Coralie going astray, and kept ready to help her with his lights if he caught her wavering.

The topography of this outlying district presents this peculiar difficulty, that the Butte Montmartre upsets all seekers of roads. This historical hill, which was in 1871 the Mont Aventinus of the Communists, forms an irregular, enormous mound, accessible on several sides by gentle slopes, but almost a sheer precipice at Place St. Pierre; it throws out spurs or foothills in three or four different directions. It impinges in the east upon the Clignancourt district, most on the Batignolles, and to the north upon ground with few houses, separated by the fortifications from the Plain of St. Ouen. As it is furrowed across and up and down by many tortuous, intertwining streets and lanes, it is difficult indeed to make head or tail of it.

In the broad day one can use the Sacred Heart Church or La Galette Mill as landmark; but at night one can easily be lost.

It was not without intention, probably, that Chamboulive made Coralie meander through these complicated ways, for if, as supposable, his mysterious abode were on the northern slope, between the hill and the wall, he could have avoided them by going round the obstacle on either hand.

Everything seemed to indicate that Coralie had not mistaken the road. The Rue de Maistre, cutting the cemetery in twain, had directly led her to the Rue des Grandes Carrières, which lengthens up to the Rue Marcadet, well known to Daubrac. He had so far abstained from addressing questions to his associate which might have disconcerted her; but as he saw her stop, he believed it the nick to comfort her, and interrogate her at the same time. They had not met a living soul since they left the main thoroughfare, and the singer had not yet shown any signs of exhaustion; but she must have been fatigued, to say nothing of puzzled, for she stared around without saying a word.

‘Well, darling, are you going on all right?’ he inquired, taking her hand affectionately.

‘I am sure I have not gone wrong up to the present,’ she muttered; ‘but I knew the beginning best.’

'Come, come; let's try to give you your bearings, as sailors say. Here is the Rue Marcadet—one you say you went through with Chamboulive.'

'I did; but not from this direction. I passed through it in the morning, coming from his house to get down to the Rochechouart Boulevard.'

'All right! it runs from the Porte de Clichy to La Chapelle. You must have crossed it elsewhere—much more, say, to the right.'

'Yes, it must have been on our right, and pretty far off. But my impression is that we must go farther onward.'

'So it's mine. Let's push on to the crossing where three or four streets branch out towards the fortifications. Perhaps you can identify the one you followed to reach the old reprobate's house.'

'Let's go on, then,' agreed Coralie, but without being enthusiastic; she seemed to have lost the clue.

The crossways mentioned was the intersecting point of the Rue Marcadet, and three rather wide ones forming out thence—Vauvenargues, Damrémont, and Montcalm, on the left, centre, and right respectively. These names gave Coralie no information, and she shook her head, muttering:

'I am at a loss. Yet I recall Chamboulive once stopping against a wall to light his pipe—the old pirate smoked vulgar pipes! Whilst he was getting it to draw I happened to look up and read the name of a street. I have forgot it, but I shall know it again if I see it.'

'Well, let's get off to the right. We may find it at the next junction.'

He feigned an assurance unfelt now, commencing to believe that his guide was completely befogged, but he refrained from disheartening her. Continuing to follow up the unlucky Rue Marcadet, where she had lost the trail, their perseverance was rewarded. Scarcely had they arrived at the first fort when Coralie, raising her eyes, exclaimed :

'Rue Duhesme! That's it this time! There's the very corner where Chamboulive struck a light. Now I answer for not going astray any more. It's a straight road hence until we arrive into a "no-thoroughfare," which I will perfectly well recognise.'

'Bravo!' cried Daubrac. 'I knew you'd pull us through. You are a pearl, and your fortune is made.'

'Oh, not yet. You go ahead too fast, young one! It is not all to find the house; we must go in, and I am afraid we shall get into trouble.'

'Don't fret yourself, but go on.'

They went along this Rue Duhesme, where Coralie exclaimed :

'Now I know it all over again. There's a large church, quite new, which I saw before. We are getting on.'

A church loomed up at some distance on their right.

'I fancy I have seen it before, too, not long ago,' added Daubrac, from between set teeth.

He did not stay to think out this vague remembrance as he touched the goal and was eagerly pressing on. Coralie was not well able to proceed; but hope gave her strength, and she walked on without grumbling. Whilst stepping out Daubrac continued to glance at the street names, and he had just read one—'Rue Versigny'—which did not give him much knowledge, when he perceived, fifty yards ahead, a large circus which he seemed to have passed recently. Greatly surprised, he had no time, however, to collect his thoughts.

'Here we are,' ejaculated Coralie, squeezing his arm. 'Here is the blind alley I spoke of.'

Daubrac stopped short, and looked where she pointed out a passage opening on the right in the middle of a long wall; it did not appear deep in extent.

'What, is that it?' he said, much astonished.

'Yes, my dear. The door is at the end, but you cannot see it, because there is not the smallest jet of gas in the alley. You cannot go wrong, though. Keep straight on, and touch the wall on both sides by stretching out your arms.'

'You say Chamboulive always entered here?'

'Always with me. There may be another passage, but not known to me. I do not know, either, how he opened it. All I can say is that it was not with a key.'

'So much the better—for I have no key, nor you. If there is a secret spring we must seek it, and it's my idea we'll find it.'

'Then you are decided to go on?'

'Rather! I have not come so far to cry off at the critical moment. Still, as I told you, if you be daunted you can let me go on alone.'

'What do you take me for, old man? I am no more a coward than you; only I might ask what you are going to do once you are in? Have you a plan?'

'My plan is to examine the house from top to bottom, and rummage every hole until we discover the securities.'

'Do you hope to find them without a light?'

'I have matches in my fusee-box, and there must be lamps about the house.'

'Lamps, candles, and candelabra in the large room. Chamboulive liked to see clear. But, look here, Charles, suppose we find the place occupied?'

'By whom?—by the ladies he used to invite?' sneered Daubrac.

'No; by people brought on the same errand as ours.'

'That's not likely. Still, if there were anyone, we would come to a settlement. I am not squeamish, and I carry a revolver. After all, the game is worth my risking my neck. I will take the lead, and you will have plenty of time to make yourself scarce if there is a row.'

'You know I should not leave you.'

'Come along then! and, by heaven! we'll carry off the spoil.'

'Listen!' said Coralie. 'It seems to me I hear footsteps yonder.'

'Policemen on their beat, probably. Let us go into the alley, and stand close up against the walls.'

Indeed, they heard the slow approach of steps in marked time, the police on a round. It did not take long to wait for them to go by.

'Now we are off again,' said Daubrac. 'Keep hold of the tail of my coat. It is black as an oven, but I have the wall to guide me.'

Coralie said not a word, but kept close to her friend, who felt sure that she was not in stout heart, despite her bravado. All he thought of was the entrance and the secret fastening of the door to be discovered haply in the profound obscurity of the alley. There was no moon this night or stars, for the sky was cloudy, and they did not literally see two strides ahead. Daubrac seemed to be playing blind man's buff as he skirted the wall with his arms groping before him. The woman shut her eyes and let herself be dragged onward.

All of a sudden, the leader struck against some obstacle with a rather rough shock, although he had not been going fast. The stout resistance almost instantly gave way, and he would have fallen flat on his face only for his hands meeting a hard, substantial surface which skinned his palm. His companion, compelled to go with him, bumped her forehead, but she was the first to understand what had occurred.

'We are in luck!' she said in an undertone. 'You must have banged up against the spring lock, and the door flew open. I got a nasty rap, but I know where we are. The corridor is closed within by a partition, but we turn to the right, and keep on straight.'

'Where will that take us?'

'Into the grand Turkish saloon. But you may as well show a light, for I don't want to get any more black eyes—one is quite enough.'

Daubrac followed this counsel, and he ascertained by the feeble flare of a cigar-light wick that they stood in the mouth of a rather broad and lofty corridor.

'Look!' proceeded the woman, nudging him; 'I spy on the floor Chamboulive's lantern. Beyond a doubt, we are in luck's way, since now we can see plainly. He used to leave it there when we went out at dark, and as he never came back after collapsing in the Grand Hotel, of course, there the glim is. Do you know what that proves, my little Charles? No? Well, it proves that nobody has come here since the old one turned up his toes.'

'That don't strike me as an undeniable demonstration,' grumbled the man; 'but never mind. We are in the house. Do not let us waste time in chatter. The lantern may be of use. Just light it whilst I get that door shut.'

'Don't do it without making sure we can open it again. Who knows what we may find indoors? We may have to retreat mighty quick, and want an opening out.'

'Take it easy—I have managed it. It's as plain as the nose on your or my face, this mechanism of Chamboulive's. A big knob inside and a spring inset outside for pressing on to make the door open. The only puzzle is to find it, and accident helped me to that.'

'Yes, you hit the bullseye first shot. The lantern is lit.'

'Pass it over. I will go on first. Is the passage a long one?'

'Very, and with endless windings.'

'The beast must have owned or leased a whole row of buildings.'

'Tush! he never counted the cost to gratify any caprice. Still, I wonder what the great windowless building was made for before he took it!'

'We may find out hereafter. Now, Forward! is the word.'

They advanced in the suggested order, the lantern-bearer as pioneer and Coralie as the rear guard, no longer between naked walls, but partitions hung with old tapestry, placed so by the last tenant of this strange dwelling. This lobby constituted a kind of girdle around the house, and perhaps had more than one issue.

'Are you sure we have to pass along here?' queried Daubrac, lowering his voice as if he was fearful of being overheard.

'Perfectly sure. In an instant we shall arrive at a spot where we will have only to pull aside the curtains to walk into the big room,' whispered Coralie, who also durst not speak aloud, night, mystery, and ignorance producing this silencing effect upon the least timorous.

Besides, both felt how imprudent it was to make a noise in a house which they were not certain was uninhabited. They continued to proceed on tiptoe, and intently listening. Erelong Daubrac stopped, pressed his companion's arm, and showed her a streak of light on the partition a dozen paces in front, on the left.

'That comes out of the large room,' breathed the singer. 'That's the entrance. We are out of luck; somebody's there.'

'Any fool could see lamps are not lit by themselves,' grumbled the disappointed treasure-seeker, though not discouraged, for no sound betokened anybody's presence.

'Let's be off,' returned the other in the same low tone. 'The expedition is a failure.'

'Maybe not. Let's wait a bit. I forbid you to stir.'

The diva of the music-halls refrained from replying, but she began to regret she had come. She saw Daubrac pull the revolver he had mentioned out of his pocket, cock it carefully, and raise it breast high, whilst he put the lantern behind him in the other hand at the same time. On this, the lady deemed it wise to recoil a couple of steps, and get behind the lantern. She felt like fleeing immediately, but did not like abandoning Daubrac or disobeying him, so she lingered. What was he waiting for? She stretched out her head to whisper him the inquiry, when weird sounds pierced the profound stillness. There was first a barely perceptible hissing, which became gradually more distinct, and yet was softer; then the rhythmical sounds of a small wind instrument of the reed class—a flute, flageolet, or fife.

Coralie was seized with mad terror. She believed a little in ghosts, and it flashed into her brain that Chamboulive's soul was manifesting itself in this same quaint melody seemingly emanating from another world. The air was one fit for the devil's return-home march, and affected Daubrac's nerves as well, although he was not superstitious; but instead of thinking of fleeing, he wanted to know with what kind of musician he had to deal. At his first step towards the light, though, his companion endeavoured to stay him by clinging to his arm, but he shook her off, and softly advanced, leaving his timid ally with her back against the wall.

The melody continued, more and more soft and dragging, with regular cadences to mark the beat. It resembled no known composition, and titillated the nerves in the most disagreeable manner. A man with a musical ear would have taken to flight merely to avoid the torture of hearing such an exasperating strain. Daubrac, far from sensitive to discord, only thought of penetrating the disquieting mystery.

What was this odd instrumentalist doing there? how had he got in? and to whom was he giving this bizarre serenade? If alone why should he amuse himself playing the flute in the middle of the night? None of these questions was Daubrac able to answer.

Still less, Coralie, who was more and more inclined to believe that Old Nick had taken possession of the ownerless mansion. Music was strictly excluded from the feasts Chamboulive had offered her in his lifetime, and she had never seen so much as the Pan-pipes in the famous Turkish saloon, however appropriate. Had Daubrac consulted her, she would have certainly advised a retreat; but he was not to be frightened away by so little, and before putting off the solution of the prize problem, he meant to be fully informed on the danger there seemed to be in carrying the advance any farther.

There was no need to open the hangings, as he could peep through the interstice whereby a ray of light pierced, and what he saw still imperfectly enlightened him.

The room was such as Coralie had pictured: a long hall, furnished with sofas and cushions of all colours, and illuminated by a chandelier hanging from the ceiling. At the far end, turning his back to the entrance, a man was squatting, crosslegged, on the floor, blowing into a reed flute to produce the notes which the music-hall star took to be emitted from the nether world. He was naked to the waist; he swung his body to mark the time, bowing and rising up like a village minstrel playing to the rustics' dancing. Yet he was alone, as well as the spy could judge from the distance, and the insufficient gleams of a dozen candles hung too high; his body was as black as a negro's. Daubrac less and less understood, and he had to have Coralie's counsel before taking any course. So he went back after her, and brought her, half by force, half willingly through her curiosity, to the opening in the hangings.

In her turn she gazed, and for a long time too; when she had looked her fill, she warned him by a jog of the elbow that she had something to tell him—not to be spoken there; however faintly she spoke the musician would have heard her. Daubrac felt this, and he turned back with her almost to the mouth of the corridor.

'Well?' he whispered.

'My dear, that darkey there is the Singalese.'

'A Singalese! what's that?'

'Haven't you been to the Jardin d'Acclimatation? They have been showing a colony of savages, come from the Lord knows where! That's one of them—I saw him among them, and recognise him by his penny whistle, which he uses to charm snakes.'

'Snakes! you are out of your head.'

'Not a jot! he has them with him! I saw them curling up to him; and it's not safe to go near. One of them stung Térèsa's husband—you know, I told you—and he died in less than ten minutes, the stupid! and if you were to go in that room they'd kill you too. Let us be off, old dear, while there's time.'

The stupefied and still more vexed adventurer was not at all inclined to go away without having cleared up matters. He was well aware that his associate did not invent this anecdote, yet he could not conceive how the Singalese had been transferred from the Jardin d'Acclimatation into the Chamboulive's home of mystery, or what he was doing here.

'Did they know one another?' he asked.

'Never!' replied the singer. 'I dare say Chamboulive never once in his stay in Paris set foot in the Bois de Boulogne. My opinion is that this snake-man has taken refuge here by pure chance. He did run away after the misadventure, and, roaming about town at night, he got as far as this. He found the door open, and popped in.'

'What you say is absurd. What would he live on here?'

'Pooh! these foreigners eat nothing at all.'

'Leave me alone with your rubbish! he must have a friend here who has harboured him, and boards him. The house evidently belongs to somebody who let it to Chamboulive, and he has taken another tenant.'

'Upon my word that's very likely; and anyhow if the money papers are here, the Singalese would not be after them. And he will not stay here for ever. He is only here for awhile—till he gets a chance or means to hook it off to the foreigners. So don't despair! We will have to try our search again, that's all.'

'And an inquiry to be made,' growled Daubrac, 'to discover the owner of this rambling old barn. If I knew his name I could soon discover the rest. Meanwhile, the treasure will have disappeared. I have a good mind to conclude while I am about it.'

'How do it?'

'By a radical movement. I care no more for that blackamoor's life than for a toad's. Were I to put a bullet in his back he would no longer hamper me!'

'A murder! Excuse me; I am not on in this piece.'

'You won't be in it; but if I succeed in laying hold of the treasures, you will still get your whack.'

'I don't want it! I hope you are not going to get into any bother over it. You speak very offhandedly, my little Charles, but a Singalese is a man for all that; and if you kill him, the judges will have your head as if you had killed an elector. This is saying nothing of it not helping you on in this enterprise. He is not alone, you may be sure; and a pistol-shot will bring people to overcome you.'

'We'll see about that!' snarled Daubrac aggressively.

'No, no; I oppose it. If I let you do it, it would show I did not love you. I repeat, there are people in the other rooms; I noticed him look at the door of the room where Chamboulive slept. And even if there were no people, there's the snakes.'

'Snakes!' echoed Daubrac, shrugging his shoulders, 'what are they to me?'

'If you entered that saloon you would not come out alive. There's a dozen of them—I saw them, all out and free—so you could not take three steps without treading on one; and one bite, you know,—you would not be long for this earth.'

This prediction impressed the hearer much more than Coralie's other reasonings. He was ready to bear a murder on his conscience, and even to risk his life against human guardians of Chamboulive's hoard; but the idea of perishing by the fang of a venomous reptile disgusted him. Besides, he began to fear that he would act ill in employing violence, and that it would be wiser to put off the enterprise two or three days, in order to attempt it under better conditions.

The music had come less distinctly to his ears since he had retired into the passage; but it continued, and, by listening more attentively, he could hear a voice calling out, without ability to catch the words uttered by this voice, to the dull echoes of this shut-up house. It followed that Coralie was right: the Singalese was not alone, and it would be folly to carry this venture farther.

'Be it so,' said Daubrac at last. 'I give it up. Away we go.'

His companion did not wait to be sued. They softly stole back to the doorway, which Daubrac noiselessly closed, and they soon stood in the Rue Duhesme. Instead of going up towards the Rue Marcadet, the leader descended to the crossways perceived by him in diving into the blind alley, and, turning abruptly to the right, he lifted his eyes to see the street name-plate on the corner house. Coralie had followed him, without venturing to ask what new fit had seized him.

'Hurrah! I see into it at last!' ejaculated he.

'What? what do you see into? We are now in the Rue du Mont Cenis. I never came this way through with Chamboulive.'

'Of course not,' answered Daubrac gruffly. 'He had his reasons for taking another way.'

He walked so fast that the lady had much trouble not to be dropped behind; but he stopped soon before a good-looking house, and said:

'I have them now! You and I will have to fight this out, John Carholt.'

Coralie seriously believed that her beloved had gone mad.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN ORIENTAL'S LOVE.

It is high time we should return to Thérèse Tercier, the courageous orphan about entering the bonds of matrimony when it was her misfortune to fascinate a scoundrel come from the heart of the Indies. Since that fatal day when he struck down her husband, fate had not ceased to stab at her.

Widowed on her wedding-day, shamefully repudiated by the tribe of the Bonhommes, misunderstood by Octave de Parentis, who had fallen in love with her only to leave her two days subsequently, she had courageously struggled against the fatality which overwhelmed her. But when she believed herself saved—when the unexpected good fortune of an advantageous engagement ensured her independence, the only thing she longed for after so many deceptions—she had fallen into an infernal plot.

She was fated to meet John Carholt, a cosmopolitan villain, ready to commit any infamy for money, and rich enough to do so with impunity. He was linked to Baroda by old-time complicity. He had a building at hand, as if expressly made, serving the shameful extravagances of an old usurer, whose agent and confederate he had been. Perhaps he would have failed but for Thérèse, wounded at no news from the captain, thinking of quitting France to go and sing abroad, and being so bewildered with sorrow as to believe the promises of a pretended correspondent of a London theatre. Dearly did she pay for her credulity by falling into the hands of the abominable dealer in pearls; and she ran great risk of paying more smartly still.

Whilst Grippe-Soleil and Daubrac were severally conferring with John Carholt—the one about Baroda, the other to induce him to join hands with him in sharing the Chamboulive inheritance—poor Thérèse was passing through terrible tribulation. Her torment had commenced on the evening when Carholt had banged the door on her after she had entered a room without looking prudently before her.

She found herself alone on the threshold of a vast, brilliantly illuminated room. She sought to turn back, but it was already too late. The door barring her passage was padded within, and solidly lodged in its frame, so that it resisted all her efforts to open it.

Then only did she comprehend that she was a prisoner, and that the pretended commission-merchant had odiously cheated her. To what purpose? She could not divine, for she was very far from supposing that this wretch had acted at the instigation of the snake-performer, whom she had forgotten.

Was it her life, or a dearer thing, that he aimed at? The former supposition was inadmissible. At Paris, as elsewhere, a woman is killed only to rob her, or out of vengeance. Thérèse had neither money nor jewellery upon her, and she had never done anybody an injury. Her fellow-performers at the Café des Ambassadeurs were jealous of her, and the elder M. Bonhomme was not over-fond of her; but there is a wide step between that and assassination.

On the other hand, who could have conceived the idea that she might be made to love someone?

Certainly it would not be this old man, who looked respectable, and was beyond the age when passion urges a man to violence. Was she to believe that he was the underling of some rich reprobate, and had played the part of a beater who drives the game into the net spread by an unscrupulous sportsman?

Thérèse had this idea strike her, but she did not dwell upon it. She reasoned that a gallant, handsome or ugly, young or old, would have paid her court before resorting to such an extremity.

Paris is the city of all the world where brutal proceedings are most seldom used, perhaps because gentle means succeed nine times out of ten when employed by persons who do not count the cost in gratifying their taste.

Since a year, nobody had troubled Thérèse, excepting the late Jacques Bonhomme and Captain de Parentis; evidently neither of them were concerned in this affair, from one being actually dead to life and the other mentally so to love. Giving up the riddle, the captive wondered where she had been led to. Not in a respectable house assuredly, whatever fair aspect the front presented where the false merchant's carriage had set her down.

This long room, without windows, lit up by chandeliers like a ballroom, and surrounded by ottomans, could only serve for evil purposes; and it was difficult for any man to lie more impudently than M. John Carholt, when he asserted it to be his room for private correspondence, for there was no writing material visible—not even a table to write upon.

Had it another outlet than this door opened and fastened by Carholt? Thérèse, after long hesitation, ventured to make sure of it. She crossed the room from one to the other end, over a thick carpet deadening her tread, and, on raising a tapestry curtain, found it to separate her from a corridor, into which she would not risk herself from deep darkness reigning there.

Returning, she made the circuit of the apartment, and discovered it communicated with several rooms, each separated from the others. They were like side-chapels out of a circular central church-nave. The first she entered was a good-sized sleeping-chamber, furnished with an immense bed and ornamented with mirrors upon all sides, even to the ceiling; and pictures of women, not overburdened in the least with drapery, hung on the walls, which Thérèse did not care to study. Here, also, were lighted chandeliers. The profusion of lights in some measure relieved the trembling prisoner; for, if she were decoyed into this padded suite to be given up defenceless to attacks of which she did not suspect the end, at least she would see the danger come.

The cabinet she next visited was surrounded by glazed bookcases, and on a large ebony table in the midst lay open albums and portfolios crammed with prints of the same school as the pictures in the adjoining room. Before the table an armchair was placed, for the accommodation of anybody tempted to go over the disgusting collections.

Here again were chandeliers loaded with tapers, not long a-burning, for they were hardly reduced an inch.

Before returning into the hall to finish exploring the alarming recesses, Thérèse wanted to see if the singular library might not be protected against the invasion of an assailant—a wise precaution for her to take. This idea striking her at the height of the trouble into which her adventure had flung her, must have been inspired by the Protector of the lonely and feeble folk.

She reasoned that her present isolation would not last for ever, as, evidently, she had not been brought there to be starved to death. The instinct of self-preservation clearly indicated that she would not be in safety in a long, large room, open at the two ends, were she might be surprised before she had time to defend herself. As in warfare, the point was to choose a position whence she could see the foe come, and, as much as possible, be sheltered from a sudden attack.

Did the library meet these requirements?

She went all around it, scanning the wainscoting narrowly, without discovering any cranny or crack.

It was solid oak, without secret doors or panels. The next thing was to learn if the only door, by which she had entered, of course, could be secured within; and the captive had the unspeakable satisfaction of seeing that it was furnished internally with three bolts, placed well apart, in the middle and above and below. This superabundance of defences much astonished Thérèse, and she questioned herself by whom and against whom they had been placed.

It was not long before she made a more curious discovery. In the upper part of the door was an oval window, and some round holes underneath it, regularly placed on the same line and near enough to one another to suit by any pair the eyes of a person in the library. Coralie would have divined at once what was their use; and she may even have made them serve during Chamboulive's nocturnal orgies. But Thérèse was too unfamiliar with low vice to comprehend, though she rejoiced at having means of defence and observation in her power.

Moreover, she considered she would do well to shut herself up in this retreat, which it only depended on her to render inaccessible, and not to leave it save when she knew all about the designs of her unknown abductors. Little by little her coolness came back to her, and she began to study her mishap item by item.

Thus she now found that M. John Carholt must have premeditated and carefully prepared the feat. Before going into action he had made inquiries of the flower-seller, and, maybe, elsewhere. The lying promises of an engagement at a leading London theatre were very well imagined to tempt a young woman thinking herself jilted to flee from Paris. The resulting argument is that M. Carholt had a plan to be carried out in a short period.

At about seven p.m. Thérèse had walked into the spiders'-parlour, where all was ready for her reception and detention. Clearly the night would not pass without her having to fight her battle with the menials of the general agent. They were in no haste to come forward, because they were sure the bird could not escape from the trap into which she had been allured. Perchance at that very moment Carholt was informing them of the means he had employed to acquit himself of his honourable errand, and receiving their felicitations at the same time as he put in his safe the price of his ignoble services.

When would the emergency arise, and under what form?

The prisoner's perspicacity could not reach so far, but she ardently wished she would not be made to languish. She mistrusted, not her spirit, but her bodily powers.

To watch was the grand point—all the night, and even longer if needs must—until the enemy showed himself. She dreaded giving way to that sleep which would surrender her defenceless to the unknown enemy—the mysterious persecutor who had taken so many pains and hatched so many ruses to secure her person. She certainly had not the least desire to sleep, but she could not indefinitely contend against the fatigue creeping over her, and felt that if she gave way she would lie at the mercy of the villain who, perhaps, was eyeing her now from some cranny in the door.

During winter campaigns those soldiers who sink to sleep rise never again. A worse fate awaited Thérèse. Therefore she had to shield herself firstly, and then protect herself against the first onset. She could find no better place than her present refuge, yet she believed that, as she could at any time get back to it in case of alarm, she might as well explore her prison-house for something better. Emboldened by the stillness, she again ventured into the large room where she had commenced her tour.

A bad idea!

She had barely set foot without before she saw a man spring up before her as though out of the floor. She threw herself back, and hurriedly re-entered the private library of Chamboulive, where she hastened to shoot the bolts in the door, dashed shut. A hard push came at it. She took good heed not to open. Rising on tiptoe she could peer through the little window, and to her profound stupefaction recognised the Singalese of the Zoological Gardens.

The rogue was clothed much the same as on the day of Jacques Bonhomme's death, but he did not wear the same physiognomy. The ordinary impassive features of the Oriental flamed with passion ; his eyes flashed, and his lips, drawn back in a bestial grin, showed his white and pointed teeth. He looked like a tiger scenting fresh meat.

Thérèse believed it all a dream.

Since the scene in the Jardin d'Acclimatation she had never thought of this man, who had followed her on that occasion with incendiary glances and Singalese love speeches beyond her ken. She was fully aware of his ogling, but Corporal Bask-in-the-Sun had but very curtly informed her about him. She knew he had disappeared after the accident, but was too busy with her own affairs to ask what had become of him, and it never had entered into her brain that this exotic juggler had in his service the John Carholt who, if neither a business nor a theatrical agent, at least had money enough to keep his carriage. And yet this was unmistakably Baroda who suddenly shot up within one of Chamboulive's rooms and showed his diabolical face through the window in the door.

Why had he not thrown himself upon Thérèse when she went along the grand hall? Perchance, though, he had been dozing in the corner and had just awakened. However this might be, Thérèse was for the instant out of his clutches, for the door was stout, and his efforts to shake it were in vain. She heard him snarl, swear, and even yell out ear-splittingly, but nobody came.

No doubt his accomplice, Carholt, was not engaged to lend him a hand, or else he did not hear these repeated calls. His rooms and offices in the Rue du Mont Cenis were very far from the building where Chamboulive was wont to hold his Sardanapalian feasts.

Therefore, the captive could feel assured of a respite, at least, and that was a great deal in such a crisis.

Not that she expected any succour from without, for she was persuaded that nobody cared for her; but Baroda might yet weary of standing guard at her door, and she hoped heaven would suggest a means of escaping the wretch's watch.

At the end of a quarter-hour, Baroda ceased knocking and calling. He even went away, but it was to return almost instantly, carrying a large basket, which he placed in the centre of the room. Again he absented himself, and re-entered to place on the carpet by the pannier a jar filled with milk, and a vase with smoking rice, which he must have cooked in one of the neighbouring rooms. It was plain that the villain installed himself here to watch as closely as possible the door of Thérèse's refuge, blockading her till hunger constrained her to come forth.

A regular siege by famine commenced. Thérèse was resolved to resist heroically, and never to capitulate, but she augured evil of the enemy's demonstration. It was as if he declared he would not budge from there until she gave in. He may even have felt pleasure in inflicting the torture of Tantalus upon her by gorging himself with rice under her eyes. At the moment the plain, gross feast did not tempt poor Thérèse, but it might make her ravenous after a few days' forced fasting.

But soon she had another sight still more disgusting and repulsive.

When dinner was over, Baroda lifted off the lid of the basket, and the prisoner, who had not ceased watching his movements through the glass pane, beheld with fright the flat heads and puffed necks of half-a-dozen hooded snakes, which set instantly to creeping to the milk jar and drinking long draughts. Baroda cared for his serpents, the only friends he had in the world, and evidently took delight in their company, since he had not forgotten to carry them away with him in his flight from the Jardin d'Acclimatation. But it was not impossible that he relied on them to keep aloof such as were ill-advised enough as to trouble his repose during his operations.

Thérèse had seen them at work. Her husband had died of the bite of one of the hideous reptiles, and she feared Baroda meditated letting them loose upon her later on, if her resistance was prolonged. The door protected her, but serpents can glide in almost anywhere, and the mere idea of contact with a cobra made her shudder. The horrible creatures gulped down the milk until full, when Baroda took them up by the tail one by one, and slung them into the basket without more precaution than if they had been inoffensive eels. After this, he put the lid on, and sat on top of it, his legs crossed, his elbows on his knees, and his face turned towards the door, behind which Thérèse remained on the look-out, with her brow against the peep-hole plate.

The Singalese's expectant attitude left no doubt of his intentions ; he was decided not to quit the place till he had gained his ends, but he renounced forcing the library entrance. He did not appear to want reinforcements now, for he had ceased crying out and calling. He waited for the coveted prey to fall into his grasp just as crocodiles swim up to the bank of a great African stream, and, with their large eyes flush with the water, fascinate the birds loading the boughs by dint of a fixed gaze. Ere long Thérèse felt the necessity of removing herself from his persistent stare. She made sure the bolts were in good order, and went away from the protective door to sit at the table laden with books and portfolios, which she was not tempted to touch. Her reflections absorbed her so strongly that slumber gradually stole over her, and she finally dozed off.

How long did the innocent young woman rest in the easy-chair where the disreputable Chamboulive had often napped ? She did not know, but it was not for long, since the candles in the chandeliers and candelabra were almost consumed when she awoke, and it was black night, which did not prove it was night outside, as this strange building had no external opening. On the other hand, the hall lights still burned, probably renewed, for Thérèse saw sparks through the glass pane and the round holes beneath it. A confused buzz reached her ears through these apertures, small though they were. Although dead beat from this bad sleep taken in an uncomfortable position, she rose and went to look through the glass.

The Singalese was no longer solitary, but he was conversing with a man whom the looker-on had some difficulty in recognizing as John Carholt. He had dropped in like a neighbour, for he was enwrapped in an ample dressing-gown, and wore yellow morocco slippers. The interview was interesting, to judge by the animation Baroda showed, bnt the pearl-dealer appeared much less moved. To the frantic gestures of the snake-charmer, Carholt answered only with shrugs of the shoulder and indifferent or ironical looks, as much as to say, 'What do you expect me to do?' Thérèse, though not catching the words, surmised correctly that she was the topic. Baroda pointed to the library door, but Carholt shook his head. Then the Singalese imitated with his arms, hung at full length, and swung forward and back, the movement of ramming down a door with a lever or beam. The other responded by shaking his head emphatically; he did not want his property damaged. He next indulged in a pantomime, of which the witness believed she guessed the sense. He made calming gestures, such as are employed to exhort one to take patience.

No doubt he explained to this impassioned savage that women must be conquered by gentleness; that the prisoner would grow tired of fasting and confinement, and come out of herself. He ought to await what Prince Bismarck terms the psychological crisis. As Baroda did not appear to relish these reasonings, Carholt more energetically laid down his refusal to help him employ violence. He made a downward blow with his fist and a stamp of the foot, which clearly signified, 'I never will do such an act.' It is true there was a subsequent leer which might be interpreted as, 'But do anything you like provided you do not get me mixed up with it.' The colloquy came to an end without the two accomplices falling into concord, and the pearl-merchant went away by the door by which Thérèse had entered.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN ORIENTAL VENGEANCE.

THE honourable merchant had looked in to see what was going on in the apartments he placed at Baroda's disposal, and returned to his own affairs, rubbing his hands like one who has not lost his morning. For, as well as Thérèse could judge, this first conciliabulum between the scoundrels took place in the morning. She had slept not more than seven or eight hours and it must have been near midnight when she had given way to fatigue and nodded off. She was not deceiving herself in this computation of time any more than she was in her conjectures on the meaning of the dialogue held under her eyes.

After having led Thérèse into Chamboulive's hall of revelry, Carholt had left the East Indian to manage as he could, and only came back a little before noon next day. Still less than Grippe-Soleil did he believe in the virtue of women, and he never doubted he should find the victim reconciled with her master, who would be showering gold upon her. A music-hall Danaë does not resist the influence of an East Indian Jupiter, who never counts the cost in gratifying a longing. But now Carholt knew that he had wrongly judged the singer, and he began to grow uneasy about the consequences of an adventure which might carry him farther than he wanted to go.

This pearl-trader was a villain, but he lived in peace with the police authorities wherever he dwelt. He always had kept within the confines of the law, and did not care to overstep the limit separating punishable crimes from the low peccadilloes which the law never reaches, or does so only with great difficulty. Therefore he had come to regret having engaged in a dangerous affair, and sought a means of getting rid of Baroda by sending him to London. If he succeeded, he fancied he would get quits by making excuses to Thérèse, or even a pretty present of cash by way of damage for the unpleasantness she had undergone. He reasoned that she would consent to hold her peace, as she would have no interest in spreading a story wherein her reputation ran so great a peril that no one would believe it had escaped.

Thérèse was ignorant of what was in his mind, and his departure did not encourage her. She remained at the mercy of the Singalese, who walked up and down the hall grinding his teeth and shaking his fist at the door he had not the strength to burst in.

'What course would he take?' Thérèse wondered, without any hope he would raise the siege.

Now that there was no light in her barricaded room, he could not see her through the glass; but she could trace all his movements, and she saw him suddenly fling himself down on the carpet, stretch out and lay his head on the cobra's basket, as though it were a pillow.

Did he really feel like sleeping? Thérèse doubted it, and was rather of the opinion that this sudden drowsiness was only a trick to entice her out of the impregnable fortalice wherein she was entrenched. Like all his race, the Singalese lacked muscular strength, but he was as active and supple as his serpents, and he would have caught her and enfolded her in his clasp at one bound had she ventured into the hall. He had missed her before from not knowing she was by, but he would not do so again now that he was watching her. But she took care not to commit such an imprudence, more than ever resigned as she was to die of inanition than fall into the grasp of this Asiatic monster.

Already she began to suffer from hunger, and asked herself how long one could live without eating, who did not possess the secret of the professional fasting men. She would have wished this a long time if she had hoped deliverance, but she had none to expect it from, and so desired a speedy arrival of death.

Who could come to her aid?

Nobody knew whither she had gone after leaving home to rehearse at the Ambassadeurs. The only person who had seen her in Carholt's carriage was Savinien de Coulibœuf, unfriendly if not an enemy, and assuredly he would not take up the hunt for the abducted vocalist.

Captain de Parentis no longer thought of her, or, if he did, it was to curse her; and the music-hall management would not apply to the police for the discovery of the hiding-place of the contract-breaker. Every day in the play-house some lady, more or less formally engaged, leaves without notice, and she is never asked for a forfeit unless it is known she can pay. In Paris, where mysterious disappearances are not rare, the police never move unless the family make a demand. Thérèse was alone in the world.

It follows that only on a miracle could she depend for escape out of this prison where her gaoler kept her in view.

She had no idea of the bonds attaching the snake-performer to the sham theatrical agent; and still less dreamt that this old traitor Carholt knew Grippe-Soleil, the showman of the Singalese Village, seen at the Zoological Gardens, and remembered but vaguely. She was far from supposing that the latter was thinking of her, and, above all, that he was not distant when Carholt left her alone with Baroda.

Whilst she was preparing to die, and Baroda slumbered, or appeared to do so, with his head on the snake basket, John Carholt was receiving in his cabinet Jean Caradoc and Charles Daubrac, who opened new horizons to him.

Carholt, as friend and partner of Chamboulive, had indeed brought off many a ticklish speculation with him, and they ran in pair-harness marvellously well, though they had not the same tastes. Carholt was tenant during long years of the double house, entered from the Rue du Mont Cenis and the Rue Duhesme, and had sub-let part to Chamboulive, where he kept house in his own way; they lived separately. Carholt never entered the Turkish saloon, although he had a key; and when the other had business to talk about he would come round to the Rue du Mont Cenis.

The old usurer's sudden death had in one day changed the state of things.

After that the commission merchant kept quiet for several reasons. To begin with, he did not want to parade his connection with the dead man, particularly lest the probate office became attracted to him. Nobody knew that he had his real domicile here, and our good Carholt reckoned on appropriating the furniture, although it had never come into his mind that the papers representing the estate were concealed in the clandestine dwelling. He had not looked there for them, of course. He had even been delighted to rent to Baroda for a handsome sum the apartments where Chamboulive played his pranks. Thus stood matters when he presented himself to his short-term lodger, on the morrow of Thérèse's abduction, to learn how the night had passed.

What he heard from the Oriental's lips set him thinking, and he promised himself to get rid of this inconvenient and dangerous guest as soon as possible. Caradoc's visit had confirmed him in this laudable intention, by showing him there were persons in Paris still interested in Thérèse; but Daubrac's had given another turn to his ideas by directing his attention to the unrecoverable fortune. Daubrac's offer had strongly tempted him, and he was rather disposed to conclude the bargain with him, but he would have preferred acting without him, and he immediately conceived the project of searching single-handed for the papers left by his old associate. If he succeeded he would have only to find the lawful inheritors and arrange for his reward.

Knowing nothing about this, Thérèse was rather surprised to see him appear at the end of a couple of hours' watching of the Singalese in his continued sleep or semblance of it. Carholt woke him by spurning him with his foot, and launched out into a colloquy as unintelligible as the preceding one, or even more so, as she had fairly made out its drift by the pantomime. This time it differed.

Carholt seemed to ask Baroda to keep quiet whilst he proceeded with some act which did not interest the snake-performer. After his explanation, to which Baroda had sat up to listen, the latter waved his hand carelessly and resumed the horizontal position, shutting his eyes. The pearl merchant had a clear field, by which he profited to visit all the rooms, such as Thérèse had glanced at, and the others. It took some time, and he came back from the exploration with a disappointed mien, which much puzzled the prisoner.

Plainly he did not find what he was looking for; but what was that? She could not divine. She had replaced herself in ambush at the light in the door, and with her eyes followed all the movements. She saw him go up to the ever-motionless Baroda and hang his head as if in hesitation, and then raise it with a gesture signifying 'It must be ended!' and come straight to her cabinet door. He did more; he rapped, and said in French, a language not understood by the Singalese:

'Allow me two words, dear madame.'

She had a good mind not to reply, but it was important to know what the villain wanted, so she said:

'What have you to say to me?'

The door was thick enough to intercept the voice, but the bored holes allowed sound through them.

'In the first place I have apologies to present,' returned M. Carholt impudently. 'I have deceived you because I was myself deceived. This Singalese told me that he had made it up with you for your coming here to meet him, provided that appearances were preserved. I wrongly believed in his falsehoods, and played a trick upon you for which I beg your pardon.'

'Wretch!' said Thérèse for all her answer.

'I am ready to repair the injury done you,' went on the pearl-trader, without resenting the epithet. 'You may go hence if only you will promise me to keep silence on what has happened.'

'I am to commence by opening this door, eh? You must believe me mad!'

'Come, come, dear madame, you cannot remain eternally shut up in a room where you lack for air and——'

'I would rather die than rest at your mercy.'

'I see what it is: you are afraid of that wild man and his snakes. You forget that I am here to protect you if he had it in his head to attack you. But I see that he terrifies you, and if you require it I will put him up somewhere like a dog chained in his kennel.'

'Spare yourself the trouble, I do not believe your promises. I hold you in horror, as I do him; and I repeat that I am not going to open this door to you. Break it down if you can. You shall not have me alive.'

'What must I do to convince you I do not want to do you any harm? I cannot go and bring in the police to summon you to open the door, and escort you out into the street. Neither you nor I would like their intervention; for from the fault of this Singalese we are both in a nasty mess. Believe me, dear madame, we should end this matter without publicity. Retake your freedom, and I will indemnify you generously for the trouble you have suffered. You may state your own conditions before coming forth,' added Carholt, as Thérèse hesitated. 'I accept them beforehand.'

Was he honest in making this promise-laden speech? Thérèse could not believe it, because she did not know what was in the greedy rascal's mind. He had come to the conclusion by this that Chamboulive had hidden his fortune in his sleeping-chamber, most likely in his bed after the manner of misers who delight to sleep on riches, and he had commenced his exploration there; but in vain had he turned the carpet up and the hanging inside out, probed the mattress and the bed, as well as the canopy, and even ripped up the mattress with scissors—he had found nothing.

The property was not there.

Though made minutely, the visitation of the other rooms had no better result. Chamboulive had certainly not concealed his stocks and bonds in the sofas of the saloon where he received such pretty company.

He must have done so in the library.

Carholt remembered that there were very suitable cupboards for packing away coin and books in which valuable papers could be interleaved. Therefore, he wanted to ransack the library from top to bottom, and here was Thérèse barricaded in it to escape the snake-charmer. To enter he would have to prevail on her to open, and this he was trying.

He did not weigh the gain he might derive from his services to Baroda against what the discovery of the millions would give.

Hence he was ready to drop the Oriental, and to save Thérèse for the riddance, but this was not easily brought about.

Firstly, Baroda would not hearken to arguments on this point: he thirsted for his prey, and would tear her from under his wing. But how could he persuade the woman that his proposals of accommodation did not veil a fresh scheme? He reaped the fruit of his perfidy: Thérèse preferred death to trust in him. He would not have hesitated to employ violence if he could, but he had no means of breaking in the door available, and he did not care to bring in reinforcements. His clerks were willing to do anything, but they did not inspire him with more than moderate confidence. There remained no resource but to convince the captive of the fairness of his intentions—a piece of diplomacy which he did not know how to set about.

'I am waiting, dear madame,' he resumed in the same dulcet tones, 'for you to ask guarantees of my sincerity.'

'Guarantees!' disdainfully reiterated she. 'There is only one that would content me.'

'Speak!'

'Bring into this large room somebody known to me. I will go forth with him with the pledge not to tell him you detained me by force.'

'The devil! hem! I—I do not know anybody of your acquaintances. Still, if you indicate one, I might——'

'Spare yourself the pain of a lie. You would not fetch me anyone I named. So it is needless for me to name one.'

'Say it, though.'

Thérèse made no answer.

Whom could she name? She had no friends. What women? her house-portress? her maid? her dressmaker? or the dresser at the music-hall? Where would be the good? If one of them consented to come with Carholt, she would not be strong enough to defend herself against two rogues like Carholt, whom she was not sure of, and Baroda, who only awaited the chance to fly at her. For an instant she thought of Octave de Parentis, but Carholt would probably refuse him, and, moreover, it was extremely doubtful that the officer would respond to her appeal. Doubtlessly he thought of her no more.

The merchant was musing. All of a sudden his eyes brightened : an idea had flashed upon him.

'I was wrong,' he said. 'I do know where to find a man who knows you, and whom you know, I dare say—a man who will hold his tongue because it will be to his interest.'

'Who is it?'

'You shall see and judge if he deserves your setting faith on him. I will leave it all to your appreciation completely.'

'And if I accept him?'

'If you do, you can walk away with him. I answer for it that, under his protection, the Singalese will not dare wag his little finger. In exchange for your liberty, I ask only one thing—the most utter silence on all that has happened here.'

'I promise you that.'

'Done, then! for I am sure you will keep your word. You have everything to lose if you break it.'

'When are you going to put this man in my presence?'

'I'd like it to be in an hour; and I regret not having thought of him sooner, for I come from seeing him. Now, I do not know if I can find him to-day; but I will certainly have him here in the morning.'

'To-morrow morning!' repeated Thérèse, shaking her head.

'Yes, it is a long time, but you need fear nothing meanwhile ; and, after all, even a bad night is soon passed.'

She might have said that she would die of hunger, but she did not even think of it, and would have gained nothing by it, for she was not of a mood to open her door to let in any food her gaoler might bring her.

'So I shall leave you,' proceeded Carholt ; 'and, before going away, I shall enjoin that savage to leave you at rest. You have shut yourself up—very properly, as I acknowledge now. Do not open to him on any pretext. I did desire getting you rid of him this evening, but it is rather late to send him to England by the night train. Pray have patience, dear madame, until I return to place you in the guard of one whom you will certainly not refuse to follow.'

Though he said he would awaken Baroda to lecture him, the pearl-merchant went out without doing so. The Indian had not stirred since he had extended himself again on the carpet.

The captive could understand nothing of the change in her decoyer's manner and language. He handled her with velvet gloves now, and announced her being set at liberty next day. Whence came this sudden revulsion ? Who was the man whom he promised to bring, assuring her that she knew him, and would have confidence in him ? On the other hand, why should Carholt take the trouble to lie if he really had not the intention to liberate her ? These enigmas she was not in a position to unravel. She could only wait for her fate to be decided.

She was ready to drop with fatigue, and felt her thoughts growing mixed—the natural effect of the weakness following a prolonged fast. She knew this, and did not try to wrestle against the torpor creeping over her. She wished to sleep up to the moment when she would be aroused for death or safety. She threw herself on the carpet here just as Baroda lay upon the other floor. She lost the sensation of existence completely, and, when she recovered it, heard a weird music which she took to be the wind whistling in the corridor.

This was the hour when the dreadful Singalese made his serpents dance; when Daubrac and Coralie, hidden behind a curtain, witnessed a spectacle which plunged them into stupor.

Thérèse dreamed that she was free, and again she saw the lawn of the Jardin d'Acclimatation. Parentis's figure passed and passed again before her eyes full of hallucination, and she called aloud to him many times. Then the vision was effaced, and she slept anew to the shrill squeak of Baroda's flute, as he diverted himself in his own way whilst meditating black schemes.

He was not satisfied. He had clearly perceived that Carholt was a turncoat, and he was thinking how to revenge himself on the well-paid accomplice who betrayed him shamelessly when he never more had had need of his assistance. He had not comprehended what the pearl-merchant said in French to the woman, but he saw they had an understanding together, and he prepared to checkmate them in his own manner.

He collected his cobras in their receptacle, and crawled like them over to the library door, where he pressed close to it.

Daubrac and Coralie had departed without his suspecting he had been espied.

He softly rose; he ran his fingers over the woodwork separating him from the coveted prey, and found the peepholes beneath the glass pane. He applied his eyes to them, but saw nothing, there being no light within. He listened, and only heard the sleeping woman's low and regular breathing. Then he went back to his basket, and picked up the smallest of his serpents by the neck between forefinger and thumb. He regained the door, and inserted the head of the poisonous reptile in at one of the holes. It glided all the way through, and disappeared.

Now Baroda would have his vengeance.

He knew well that the cobra would not leap at the sleeper, for snakes never attack; but he also knew that it would bite anybody who stepped on it—and he wished it would be John Carholt when he entered the library.

Thérèse had noticed nothing of this, for she had not been aroused, and did not suspect that death had crept into her refuge.

CHAPTER XX.

ANOTHER GODSEND.

On leaving M. Carholt, Grippe-Soleil had gone straight to the Grand Hôtel; but he had not found the captain there, or at the club, to his deep regret at inability to announce the good tidings of Baroda's departure. For he believed this, certified as it was by the pearl-dealer ; and, during his visit to the Rue du Mont Cenis, he had not suspected that the Singalese was lurking close by. Still less did he suspect how Thérèse was undergoing torment and dread of death in an outbuilding of Carholt's commercial house.

The corporal of Spahis had then resumed thinking of his uncle's millions, momentarily forgotten in his hunt after Baroda, but most unexpectedly recalled to memory by his interview with Chamboulive's former partner.

'I know where they are,' Carholt had concluded by saying, after having suggested they should agree and eliminate Daubrac.

This confidence was one made to tempt Grippe-Soleil, who had but a word to speak to handle the greater part of an inheritance legitimately coming to him, but which might elude him if he let things drag. Carholt bragged when he said he held the securities, since he was still on the search for them ; but he 'burned,' as they say in hunt-the-slipper, and everything presaged that he would not be long unearthing them.

The old soldier argued firstly that his interest was to treat with the earliest to seize the papers ; but his fundamentally honest nature resumed the upper hand, and he loyally resolved to notify Daubrac. In fact, if he should inherit, he would primarily owe it to his old comrade in the Oran Spahis for putting him on the track, and he did not want to cheat him of his commission. Hence, that same evening, he went towards the Rue Rougemont, where Daubrac lived, with the laudable intention of asking him out to dinner as well to regale him as to relate over the dessert his visit to John Carholt and his chat with that honourable merchant, who only sought to carry off the stakes for himself.

Grippe-Soleil had reckoned without including the habits of the boulevardiers of Daubrac's stamp. Coralie's friend scoured Paris all the day on business, breakfasted anywhere it suited him, and only looked in at home to dress for dinner. He prided himself on his style, but he belonged to no club and no set, and only wore full evening-dress on grand occasions, for example, when he went to the first night of a new play, where he expected to meet spendthrifts in quest of a monetary loan.

So Bask-in-the-Sun was out for his journey, Daubrac not being at his lodgings, but having gone to dinner at the Café Riche, and thence to the Ambassadeurs Café-Concert to recruit Coralie for the night expedition he contemplated. The old soldier, who did not frequent such places, employed his time in taking refreshment at divers houses, absorbing such a number of glasses of liquor as finally to become completely tipsy. This was his principal weakness, of which he was somewhat corrected, but not cured, and he yielded to it willingly. It is asserted that in wine a man shows his true character. When our old free-lance was under its influence, he became sentimental. He opened his heart to people never seen before, sorrowed over the woes of others, put his sword and purse at the call of the first-comer, and sometimes ended by moaning over his misspent youth. If he had met his captain, he would have melted into tears and smothered him with protests of devotion.

But he was alone in the midst of that immense city where nobody cares for his neighbour, and he had to bewail his own miseries of yore, for he had not too much to complain of in the present, and the future loomed up brightly with his hope of entering into the possession of the great inheritance from his uncle.

He called up the memory of his first love, a few words of which he had uttered to his captain. It was lost in the night of time, and had not been happy. In growing old, his heart had hardened, and he thought unseldom of his early flames; but the alcohol had refreshed his memory this night, and he saw all of them appear.

Above all was one, a charming, good young girl, whom he had loved fondly a whole year through, but cast off one day without knowing why. She had not resembled in any way his other Parisian conquests. She was of good birth and education, and he felt remorse for having abandoned her thus, without any motive—such remorse as fifteen years' soldiering in Africa and Tonkin had appeased, but it often revived since he had thrown off the belt and straps, as they say militarily.

His consenting to accompany the Singalese to France was a little with the hope of redeeming that stain—a chimerical hope, if you like, since the jilted one had never sent him any news—but it had glowed afresh lately upon the passable certainty of being able to make amends to her by sharing with her the windfall, if he had the miraculous happiness to recover it. Soon it occurred to blame himself for not having acted in the matter since he had come to Paris, and, mainly, since he had leisure. So long as duty retained him in the Zoological Gardens, he had an excuse to give himself; but now he was master of his whole time, he considered it unpardonable not to commence his searches. He had much busied himself about his captain's love, a little about his uncle's inheritance, and not at all about a poor creature whom he had wronged, and who might be very miserable now if still alive.

'It's shameful!' he said to himself. 'I am acting like a Chinese pirate! Here she may be sinking with hunger, while I am guzzling in the café. One of these days she will beg of me at the corner, without my knowing her. In plain speech, I am a scoundrel! and it is time I settled this properly, or I shall be degrading myself—taking off my military medal—if I dance around town without worrying about Julie.'

This generous resolution calmed him a little, and made him empty a bottle, the more so that he had some ado to regain his hotel in the Rue de la Michodière, although not far from the place where he took the stirrup-cup.

At the hour when Daubrac, who was supping near there, started off with Coralie on the discovery of the treasure, the ex-corporal was sleeping like a saint in paradise. He was so constituted that a night's rest set him up again when he had had a drop too much, and so he woke at dawn as fresh and able for work as though he had turned in at nine after the most sober of meals.

On opening his eyes, he first thought of the forlorn sweetheart, and jumped out of bed to put his plan into operation which he had formed overnight—to go on the quest.

At seven he was on the march, and, being as good on his feet as in the saddle, he reached the Place de la République by eight.

The Faubourg of the Temple, which commences here, had not much changed in twenty years.

His old sweetheart had lived in a house at the corner of the Rue du Faubourg du Temple and the Rue Fontaine-au-Roi. He perfectly well recognised the house, and spied against the doorpost of it an old witch, leaning on a broom, who awoke distant recollections. He seemed to have seen that tufted mop of hair and hawk-nose. Still, it was so unlikely that the same woman was housekeeper as a score of years ago, that he hesitated to address her. She took the initiative by hailing him in terms more than familiar.

'I say, you—you bloated aristocrat, why are you staring me down for?' she called out.

Familiarity on short acquaintance might be overlooked; but to style Grippe-Soleil 'bloated'—a man only skin and bones—was the height of absurdity, and he could not help laughing. On this, the hag cried out:

'Don't try any of your larks here, but get you gone on your lay, you big beanpole, you!'

'Now, don't get cross, old lady,' returned the ex-

Spahi. ‘I want to have a chat with you. What can I offer you? a stiff glass of grog, or gin and bitters?’

‘First off, tell me what you want o’ me; I will answer after. I warn ye that I do not drink with the “sneaks.” That means, if you are one of the “nabs,” you can take your toes out of this.’

‘I hate sneaks as much as you. Plainly, I only want to ask news of a lodger in No. 67, in the old times. But you would not have been about then—I am speaking of before the War.’

‘Ladle it out all the same. I went into this porter’s lodge in ’63.’

‘It don’t go so far back as that. Do you remember a young party living on the fourth floor, and who gave lessons on the piano—a fair girl, very good-looking?’

‘I rather think I do *recommember!*’ exclaimed the old woman. ‘Handsome Julie! If you are hunting after her, my boy, you are losing your time. She moved away ever so long ago.’

‘Oh, I thought so,’ said the old soldier; ‘but I want to know what became of her.’

‘What she became, eh? Well, old! considering it’s twenty years since she lived here.’

‘I know it; but——’

‘What do you want with her? Did you know her?’

‘Very well—she lived with one of my friends.’

‘A long good-for-nothing, who “let her in,” and hooked it one fine morning without leaving two sous to keep her dead eyes shut. A nice beggar to talk about! not worth the rope that’ll hang him!

If you are a friend of his'n, I compliment you; he was a perfect bla'guard!'

The veteran was well aware that he himself was being abused, but he took care not to be angered, and still less own to the anything but soft impeachment. He reckoned himself only too happy in not having been recognised by the old beldame, and hoped that she would furnish the precious intelligence.

'Yes, that's true,' he said. 'He behaved very mean towards Julie; but how could he help it? He was ruined and obliged to go for a soldier. He ate the black bread of poverty, too.'

'More'n she got, for she wasted away with hunger. Why, hang it all, the curs in the street get some'at to gnaw at now and then!'

'He has awfully repented of what he did; and the proof is that he thought of her before dying.'

'Oh, he cracked his whistle, did he? A good job! Go on! His thinking of Julie before he kicked the bucket will do her a lot of good, won't it?'

'He left her all he had.'

'What a prize; he had nothing!'

'Stop a bit! Some property was left him, and he made a will to the profit of his old sweetheart. That's why I am looking her up.'

'Really! real and true?'

'On my word of honour! and if you can tell me where she is I will reward you handsomely. I shall not haggle over a five hundred franc note.'

'Hullo! you are an honest *pal!*'

'I flatter myself I am one. If you give me the address of your old-time lodger, I will hand you over the five hundred counters.'

'But s'pose I give you a false one, you big *mug?*'

'I should not pay you until I saw Julie.'

'Then you are not the softy I believed you. I am eager to touch the blunt, for I am not rolling on gold and silver; but the trouble is that I do not know where the beautiful blonde is *resting*. I never heard speak of her since she went away from here, and my 'pinion is that she is hanging out in "Cayenne" or "The Turnip-field." That means,' added the portress, as her hearer appeared not to understand bywords familiar to the populace of Paris, 'that means the cemetery of St. Ouen, and t'other at Ivry. Where do you come from that you don't "twig" that? She hadn't the wealth to buy a family vault in Père-Lachaise, you know; so, then, they must have chucked her into the paupers' ditch.'

The soldier had cold shivers up his back at the thought of the old gossip's sinister prediction being probably verified. For lack of help he might have sent her, his first love had died in frightful want, and her remains had suffered the affront of the promiscuity of sepulture, which is one of the shames upon the city which boasts of carrying civilization to its utmost pitch of refinement. There was no reason for the soldier to be discouraged though, and he resumed interrogating the portress, who was not as rough as she looked.

'If she be dead,' said he, affecting an uninterested air, 'she needs nothing. That's clear as day. But you did not see her funeral?'

'I never see nothing at all, since I never had news of her after she moved away.'

'Then she may be in very good health?'

'I don't believe so, for she never was strong when young. She might be alive though; for, in fact, she would not be very old.'

'She would be barely forty-two; she was not twenty-five when I—my regimental comrade left her.'

'A dirty trick, for she loved him. I am here to testify to that! Rather than bemean herself to ask money of such rubbish, she killed herself by work. It made my heart bleed to see her a-going out of a morning to give lessons in weather that would sicken a dog, with low slippers on her feet, and a poor little summer cape on her back.'

Grippe-Soleil did not breathe a word; he felt like weeping.

'And honest through it all,' proceeded the harridan. 'When that scum of the earth left her she owed two quarters' rent, and her furniture was seized by the brokers. She might have done like lots of others—"shot the moon"—I wouldn't have prevented her. But, no; she gave herself no end of trouble to make up the money, so that she paid every sou before she went away! And in her condition, too! My stars! she must have had pluck!'

Her hearer took the appreciation for a commonplace eulogy, and did not guess the signification of the three words, 'In her condition.'

'Since she saved her furniture, you ought to have noticed where she removed,' he muttered.

'No, she did not like to tell me. I asked about her letters that might come here, and she answered that she expected none. Indeed, the postman did not often have any for her—only postcards now and again from her customers—ladies writing to put off their day to another—never any love letters. Only to think that the baker's wife, at the corner, gets 'em three times a week, at least—with wreaths of roses painted on the envelope—a woman of fifty, who throws sheep's eyes at all the cheap swells of the faubourg! Handsome Julie wasn't that sort, not she! She never looked at the men, and never made but one false step in her life, and stiff she paid for it, dearer than if she had gone to the maker's—the mayor's, I mean. That little darling was meant to 'a' been a rose-queen at Montmorency, she was! Only to think she let herself be gammoned by a trickster!'

Grippe-Soleil knew who that trickster was, but he swallowed this bitter pill without wincing.

'I can understand,' he said, 'why she did not leave her address on going, but I am astonished that you never ran up against her in Paris. She must have been out very often since she was reduced to going out to give lessons.'

'She changed into another part of the town. And then again, I don't go out at all, because I am all alone to watch the door; and when Julie left us, I was widow of my second huband, poor old chap, who burned up his blood with cheap wine. Dear me! every time I think on him it turns my heart upside down, and nothing sets it right again so well as a quencher. If you meant to stand a glass of never mind what, now's your time!'

Since the soldier had spoken of the five hundred francs, the old woman had been less familiar. He did not resent this invitation to refreshments, but entered a drinking place at the end of the alley, where he called for two glasses of brandy. He clinked glasses with the old portress, who exclaimed :

'Now, this is proper! You are not a proud chap! Here's wishing I may do you some service, if I can.'

'You will much oblige me if you will make some inquiries. There must be people round about here who remember Handsome Julie.'

'Well, I don't believe so. To begin with, it's such a long time ago; and then again, she did not talk to everybody. She carried her head rather high, did Handsome Julie! I must tell you this, but I will ask all the same. The herb-doctor at No. 19 knew her; he used to sell her drugs, for the poor thing was never in good health, 'specially in the last days she spent here! Of course not! You understand. I will ask the old dealer in dry grass if he has any news of his patient. Who knows but he may give some; and I will tell you when you come again.'

It was a hazy look-out, but the inquirer did not want to neglect anything, and, on the other hand, he did not care to leave his name and address with this woman, who might recall that the name of her former lodger's first and only swain was Jean Caradoc.

'I shall very soon be seeing you again,' he said earnestly.

'You are sure to find me. I never lea my lodge but to have a 'livener-up here,' returned the old woman. 'Then,' she added, emptying her glass, 'it's just this way—you are looking after Julie to make her fortune?'

'For nothing else. You have grieved me by telling me she may be no longer of this world.'

'Oh, I said that at random. It would be awfully rough on her after being "up a tree" all her life. She must be dreadful down on her luck to miss this streak of richness.'

'And it would be sad to me, for I could not carry out my friend's last wishes. He left no relations, and so the Government will collar the property.'

'That wouldn't be fair. The Government don't want poor folk's money. But it won't nail it, even if Julie be dead.'

'But, yes, it will.'

'Never! Julie's kid will get it. When she moved away from here she was in a delicate position, and the father had run away two months before.'

'The f—f—father?' stammered Grippe-Soleil.

'Why, yes, her sweetheart! That's the villain that her trouble is all a-owing to.'

'He never knew anything about it.'

'You fancy so, do you? Likely enough, but he'd 'a' run away all the same. Men are all monsters! I tell you what, there's a little man or little woman in the case; I don't know which, for Julie did not invite me to the christening. But, whether boy or girl, the inheritance will come just the same.'

'Father!' thought Corporal Bask-in-the-Sun, overwhelmed with astonishment. 'I am a father!'

'The young 'un will take the property instead of the mother,' went on the old concierge, better informed on the tittle-tattle of her neighbourhood than the legislation of her country.

'Unfortunately, it's not so,' said the soldier, shaking his head. 'If the mother died before my friend did, the child will get nothing.'

'Is what you are a-saying so in the law?'

'Alas, yes!'

'Then it's not just.'

'Moreover,' continued the man, 'an unrecognised natural child has no claim on its father's property.'

'This is a pretty beast of a law, isn't it? It isn't the kid's fault if her bla'guardly father forgot to declare he was his own, at the mayor's office.'

'Nor the father's neither, if he did not know it existed.'

'Hold your tongue! He would have known if he had not left the mother without word of warning. You say he repented of it. It was high time, by my fay! If the poor woman has starved to death and the kid hasn't a penny, it will serve that heartless wretch quite right for only thinking to deplore his rascality at the end o' twenty year. Just you go and hunt the little 'un up, you who are charged to repair the wrong done its mamma! Julie can't have had any means of feeding it since she had not enough for herself. She wasn't the woman to drop it at a corner-post or up a dark alley, but she must ha' taken it to some fo'ndling 'sylum.'

'It may not have lived.'

'And Julie may have died in childbirth. Then it will be your scoundrelly friend who killed her. But after all I am telling you a lot of stuff without knowing anything at all, unless it be her having something to look forward to when she left. Now I'll inquire right and left, and I may have news for you when you look back. Oh, I would be jolly glad if you did a good turn to the brave girl or her kid — somehow, d'ye know, I fancy it'll be a boy.'

'I hope so myself.'

'I don't. He would take after his dad, and he was not worth two sous.'

The soldier hung his head, finding the estimate severe but just, and one he could not resent.

'While, if it be a girl, it ought to "favour" the mother,' resumed the old woman. 'Julie was faulty, that's true ; but only once, and if she had not met a villain she would have been married and lived an honest woman.'

Her hearer could contain himself no longer. The concierge's talk cut him to the heart and spurred him to go. He thanked her again for her good will, and, to encourage her to persevere, he slipped a bright twenty-franc piece into her hand, which she accepted without pressure. She overwhelmed him with thanks and protests of devotion, which he cut short by retaking the way back to the boulevards.

Since this conversation in the drinking-place, Bask-in-the-Sun was no more the same man.

He had come to fulfil a duty, to unburden his conscience with no hope of finding any trace of the poor woman whom he blamed himself for abandoning. He went away perturbed, full of emotion, and revolutionized by the information gleaned, brief though it was, and only confirming his fears on the fate of the unhappy Julie; but they had opened an unforeseen vista. The idea that he had left a child behind him on quitting France had never come up in his mind, and an entirely new feeling germinated in him, that of paternity, slumbering in the depth of soul of even the most reckless adventurers. Our Dalgetty was not familiar with it yet, but, far from seeking to stifle it, he intoxicated himself with it as with new wine. His future seemed to broaden, and his life assume a new face—a life so badly employed in flinging his wild oats to the four winds, and obscurely warring in distant lands. It had a goal now.

Man is thus constituted that the corporal of Spahis less ardently longed to recover his mistress, old and faded, than to attach himself to a being born of his own race, and regenerate himself in the child that would remind him of his best years, and be loved as he never had loved. As one always forces a belief in what is passionately desired, he delighted to recall some vague hopes and wishes expressed by Julie to the effect that she might not be utterly alone in case he was lost to her. This memory, effaced with so many others, suddenly returned and filled him with joy. A premature joy, it is true, and a hope of fatherhood reposing on far from solid bases.

The old woman had not been able to speak of Julie's child, but the soldier believed in its existence with the fervour of a new convert. He was sure it lived, and the only thing was to find it.

The lesson in law which he gave the portress of No. 67 did not at all apply to the particular case of Jean Caradoc, who was not dead, as his pretended friend asserted, to throw the gossip off the scent. He enjoyed all his civil rights, including that to legitimatize offspring born out of wedlock and leave it property. By the terms of the law, a grandfather cannot benefit illegitimate children, but any French citizen without heirs can will as he pleases. Grippe-Soleil made up his mind to use this right in enriching the unknown descendant. He wished it to be a boy, as a girl would be in his way. He calculated that it would be about twenty, the age when the character is formed and life is decided. He would be handsome as his mother and brave as his father; he would make his way in the army, and gloriously wear the epaulets which his sire had never won.

The corporal did not ask himself how this supposititious youth had lived. Had he remained at his mother's apron-strings, supposing the mother not dead? had she been able to rear and educate him? or had he been an orphan from birth, received out of charity by some working family, and put out at apprenticeship? or had he wallowed in the city gutters, where the castaway youth too often fall? Would his father find him in a college, a factory, or a prison?

This dread problem little worried the hopeful Bask-in-the-Sun, accustomed from an early date to rely on the Providence preserving him from Arab bullets and Tonkinese darts. He was not so very wrong in wishing for a boy, as a girl would only by a miracle escape from the destiny awaiting poor girls in Paris from their infancy. What would he do with a luckless one? A perverted boy may be corrected, but a fallen girl cannot be so easily replaced on the path of virtue. Besides, he had none of the qualities to accomplish such a rescue. The vocation was lacking, and he could not have preached with himself as example, from always having lived like a trooper who respects nothing outside of discipline. Again, his antipathy for the weaker vessels influenced his mind.

On all accounts, he expected a boy who would make a soldier.

This is what he said to himself as he walked along the main thoroughfare towards the Madeleine, thinking no more for the moment of the Chamboulive estate — which, nevertheless, held a great place in his future.

He had forgotten to ask the old portress on what she relied to discover her once lodger, in the city; she had mentioned a herbalist in the neighbourhood; but that was a very unsubstantial source. Still, our veteran was a man of dreamland, and he firmly depended on an immediate result.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE INDIAN'S RETALIATION.

PASSING along the Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle, whom should he come into contact with but Daubrac. He had fruitlessly sought for him overnight, and here he met him coming out of the Rue Rougemont, where he had returned at four a.m. after having seen Coralie home. This meeting seemed of good portent to the corporal, although his eagerness about the millions had diminished.

'Does our bargain stand?' queried Daubrac bluntly. 'Will you relinquish a third to me?'

'I never go back on my word,' observed the other.

'All right, dear boy; you shall pocket the rest.'

'Less another third for my uncle's late partner, I suppose.'

'Less nothing at all. I have that partner under my thumb, in a position where I can lay down the law. If he claims a share of the cake, I shall threaten to show him up, and he will get away softly, I warrant you. I am going to do the thing thoroughly.'

'Eh—denounce him? What's he been doing?'

'Never mind! I know what I am talking about. Mark well what I am going to tell you. To-morrow—you hear? to-morrow, I say—I am going to bring you Chamboulive's securities. If there be but three millions, you are to pay me only one, by personal delivery, when you shall be in possession of the inheritance.'

The other had a good mind to reply, 'I know the partner, and it depends solely on me to arrange directly with him;' but he held his peace, out of respect for his comrade in the Spahis, and a little through prudence also. He suspected that, since his call on Carholt, things had happened not in his knowledge, and he feared to speak inappositely. It was well he acted so, as he learned ere the day was over.

'I am leaving you now, dear boy,' continued the speculator, 'because I have not a minute to lose in making that scoundrel shell out. Wait at home for me to-morrow morning till ten. I shall have news for you.'

Upon this promise, Daubrac sprang into a passing cab, and away he went, leaving the corporal astounded and a trifle disquieted. He was keen enough to mistrust what he did not understand, and he did not do so as regards this farewell speech. He could not divine that, on the night before, Daubrac had not only discovered the enchanted Castle of Chamboulive, but the secret of John Carholt's hospitality to the Singalese snake-performer.

After the night expedition, too, he had questioned Coralie about the last named. Hence he knew the story of the husband bitten in the Jardin d'Acclimatation, and he determined to levy blackmail on the pearl-merchant by threatening to inform the authorities of the existence of the double house, useful for all kinds of malevolent work.

Daubrac planned to go this same day to the Rue du Mont Cenis, to constrain the householder to yield up entrance into his old associate's dwelling, and help him forcedly to search for the valuables until found. Then they would come to an arrangement; but the master of the situation would impose his will upon Carholt, who ought to esteem himself only too lucky to give up any part to buy Daubrac's silence. Once in agreement, the kind-hearted speculator would aid the honourable trader to get rid of the burdensome Baroda.

Not being admitted into these plans, Bask-in-the-Sun wondered how Daubrac would act to redeem his promise, and strongly doubted he would succeed; but he knew him to be bold, and fortune favours the bold. He might as well wait for the morning's explanation. Meanwhile he had nothing better to do than go home, where he was in the habit of breakfasting, and peacefully enjoy by anticipation the delight of the paternity he dreamed over.

He was much startled, on going up the humble Rue de la Michodière, to see a stylish coupé, drawn by a thoroughbred, stationed before the Providence Hotel. He was still more startled when he heard the master of this fashionable turn-out hail him by name as he was going to step within the hotel passage. He quickly turned, and recognised John Carholt hanging out of the doorway, and smiling and offering his hand. He could not do less than accept the hand, and ask what he could do for the pearl-trader.

'My dear fellow,' answered he easily, 'you can get me out of a rare pother.'

'What must I do?' asked the soldier.

'Nothing very difficult. Step into my carriage and come along with me. I came early to catch you on the hop out of bed, but I arrived too late, as you went out at break o' day. But they told me you came in for breakfast, so I waited—and quite right of me, too, for here you are. Jump in, my friend.'

'I am agreeable; but what for, may I know?'

'I will tell you all about it on the way.'

A little against his will, Caradoc submitted to taking a seat in the carriage, which at once set off. Carholt did not keep him waiting.

‘My dear Caradoc,’ commenced he, ‘I must confess that when you called yesterday to ask news of Baroda, I did not tell you the truth.’

‘You don’t say so!’ exclaimed the stupor-stricken soldier.

‘I was very wrong, and I have been soundly punished for it, for, if I had only told you the truth, I would not be in my present scrape. Baroda did not go to London as I believed.’

‘Pardon me, but you told me you had seen him off by the Great Northern Railway.’

‘So I did, but he got out and slipped back through the station, and returned to graft himself upon me without my permission.’

‘And you look to me to make him vacate?’

‘Yes, by telling him the police are at his heels. He will believe you, and deliver me of his presence. But I am looking to you for something else.’

‘What’s that?’

‘You spoke to me of a young woman in whom one of your friends, an officer, is interested.’

‘I did. Her husband was bitten at the gardens by one of Baroda’s snakes, and died of it. I feared Baroda would run away with her.’

‘You were right in that fear. Not that he did it personally, but—I am at a loss to know how he attracted her to his lodgings—an outhouse, so to call it, of my own place—where she is.’

‘Good heavens! what has that villain done to her?’

‘Nothing up to now. She shut herself up in a oom before the savage could lay hand upon her.

He is standing guard at her door, and she will not come forth. She has been there six and thirty hours, and will die of hunger if not relieved.'

'Confound it all! you were bound to save her since it is under your roof.'

'I am only too willing, and I should have done it if I could. But she is afraid of Baroda, and will not trust me. I could get Baroda removed by calling in the police, and it would be easy then to get her to quit her refuge—but I prefer to manage the Singalese affair smoothly, and not get myself into trouble. If I can get her to go, I would settle with Baroda after. Yesterday I parleyed for an hour with her through a hole in the door, but she would not open it.'

'Then she will not to me.'

'I believe she will. She finally stated her ultimatum that she would go forth on the arm of somebody known to her, on whose honour she could depend, and she must see him before entrusting herself to him.'

'You thought of me, eh?'

'Naturally, my dear fellow. You know her—she knows you, and you take much interest in her since you came to me expressly to learn if she had anything to fear from Baroda. You are the man for the emergency.'

'A pretty emergency,' commented the veteran. 'I never meddled with such goings-on. Why do you bring me into it?'

'Because I believed you my friend.'

'That's a strong word!'

'And also because I hoped we would work a piece of business out, most advantageous to the pair of us. Did you not say you might discover Chamboulive's heirs?'

There was little need to be a Columbus, our corporal of Spahis being the sole heir himself.

'Well, I have found the securities representing the estate,' went on Carholt.

'So you said yesterday.'

'Ah, but I did not exactly hold them, whilst now I have a certainty. They are not in my pocket, but would be if——'

'Go on?'

'If I were rid of that woman.'

'How so?'

'She is shut up in the very room where the documents are, and I cannot get at them unless I smash in the door. Don't you understand now what a service you can do me?'

He understood that Mr. John Carholt was still more villainous than aforethought. He perceived that Chamboulive's secret domicile might very well communicate with the Rue du Mont Cenis house, and that the pearl-trader had aided Baroda to abduct and sequestrate the Bride of a Day; but he only half credited the existence of the treasure which Carholt asserted to be within touch, but not to be touched on account of Thérèse's presence.

On the other hand, the brave fellow did not want to leave a woman, still beloved by his captain, perhaps, at the mercy of two rogues. He reasoned that he did not risk much by going to see her, for Baroda did not frighten him, and his confederate still less. He had a hold on them to boot, since they were in such a dilemma.

'Come, come, dear friend,' pursued the trader, 'you cannot refuse to aid me. I repeat to you that things will go swimmingly. As soon as this virgin martyr sees you, she will agree to anything and follow you.'

'I doubt it; but, admitting that she consents, what about Baroda, who is on the watch, you say?'

'You will bid him be quiet. He is used to obeying you, and will not stir. If he does cut up rough, we'll lock him up in some lumber-room.'

'I have a six-shooter in my pocket, and if he shows any monkey shines, I shall not be tender about blowing his head off.'

'I'm not the one to hinder you. Then I may rely on you?'

'To free the woman—yes.'

'That is all I ask. I think I have no need to ask you to keep secret. It is between ourselves, and a matter that will turn to our mutual satisfaction.'

Bask-in-the-Sun did not respond. He found he had committed himself quite far enough, and meant to reserve some liberty of action. The horse went like the wind. Poor Thérèse knew something on this head, for it was the same which had drawn her from the Place de la Concorde to the Rue du Mont Cenis two evenings previously. It took less time to convey thither our champion of the distressed, who was preparing to fence at close quarters.

'I do not know where you are taking me to,' he remarked before getting out of the vehicle; 'but I forewarn you that if you swerve out of the straight line, I shall use my revolver on you as freely as I would on Baroda. So, no tricks on an old soldier!'

'What do you take me for, dear friend?' said Carholt laughing. 'Do I look like a robber-chief? Do you imagine I am decoying you into a brigand's den?'

'If I believed that, I should not follow you,' coldly replied Bask-in-the-Sun; 'but I want you to know I am on my guard.'

'Pshaw! I am not offended. In ten minutes from this, I shall prove to you that I was not deceiving.'

'You mean, we have not far to go?'

'Only my house and a yard to go through. Beyond stands a large building, of no use to me, which I leased to Chamboulive to carry on his own games.'

'You might have told me so yesterday.'

'Yesterday we were not at our present point, and I did not think that fact would interest you. However, when we shall have finished with Baroda and the woman, I will give you the story, by chapter and verse, of my connection with Chamboulive. I hope you will not repeat it to Daubrac.'

'He will be here to be told it.'

'Have you seen him?'

'I met him this morning on the Boulevard, when he said he was going to give you a call soon.'

'He will arrive too late. The papers will be found. I suppose you do not stand out stoutly to his having a share in the spoil?'

'I am waiting for you to show me the road,' drily responded Grippe-Soleil, not willing to be explicit on this point or many others.

Carholt abstained from pressing the question, being in haste to conclude the move which would enable him to trade in the fortune of his late associate; he did not doubt all would come round to his full desire.

Since evening he had not seen Thérèse or Baroda; but he thought that the former would be impatiently awaiting him, and that, with Caradoc's help, he would not have much trouble to make the Singalese listen to reason. He conducted the soldier by the road along which he had beguiled the prisoner; but, more on the alert than she, he stoutly refused to go the first when the door of communication was reached. The merchant understood, and preceded him into the hall. Grippe-Soleil only followed after shooting out the bolt of the lock and wedging up the spring slide so that it could not be closed altogether without his permission. Leaving it wide open, he propped it so with a stool. The place was not so brilliantly illumined as before, as the tapers were burnt down. Some others had been lighted by Baroda, but he had no doubt found too few for renewal of all.

He had remained on the floor in the middle, filling so small a space that Carholt had to call him for the soldier to perceive him. At the voice, the Indian rose, and appeared disagreeably surprised at beholding his recent showman, who apostrophized him hotly—in Singalese, of course.

'At last I have you, you robber!' roared Jean Caradoc, roughly shaking him. 'I have been quite long enough on the search for you to have you hanged. You have murdered a Frenchman with one of your cobras; and I am going to hand you over to a *policeman* to be taken to prison.'

Baroda very well knew what policemen were, from there being some in Ceylon, and prisons, too. He knew, furthermore, that English law does not trifle with murderers, and he must have believed that, being a British subject born, he would be tried as such, even in France. The soldier had struck home in menacing him with consignment to the police; Carholt would not have said it, for good reasons.

Baroda did not protest his innocence, but quickly replied:

'If I must go to prison, it won't be alone. This rascal John has done worse than me. He took my money to bring that Frenchwoman here.'

Bask-in-the-Sun suspected as much; he looked fixedly at the pearl-merchant, who dropped his eyes, faltering:

'I will show you how things happened. Have done with Baroda, I entreat you.'

This was said in French, not understood by Baroda, who went on recriminating in his own tongue.

'It was he who went after her. He told me she was quite willing, and she is not. John has stolen my money; but let him keep it, if you will let me go back to Ceylon.'

This was just what the soldier wanted, and he lost not a moment in profiting by the Indian's willingness, who played into his own hands.

'All right,' he said, 'you may go. But commence by obeying me. Here,' he said to Carholt, 'haven't you a room where we can shut him up?'

'There's one,' answered the merchant, showing the open door of Chamboulive's dining-room. 'I lodged him there at first, and he has cooked his rice in it since he came under my roof. I have the key in my pocket.'

Baroda did not follow the words, but he guessed by the gestures.

'Come along,' said the ex-showman to him. 'You must spend the day here. This evening I myself will see you off by the railway, and you will be in England to-morrow. You have a London correspondent?'

'Yes. He has money of mine.'

'Good! He will manage the sending you home.'

The Singalese felt he was caught, and, like all his race, he always gave way to a stronger hand. This was all he wished.

'I am ready,' he said, stooping to pick up his snake-basket.

Recognising it, Bask-in-the-Sun cried out:

'What—did he bring away his cobras?'

'Without telling me, I'll take my oath!' said the pearl-trader, who did not gibe at a lie more or less. 'But what does it matter to us? If they bite anybody, it will be himself.'

The veteran snapped his fingers, and said curtly:

'Give me that door-key.'

When he had it, he shoved Baroda into the dining-room, and locked him in with the serpents.

'Ah! you have pulled a sharp thorn out of my side,' ejaculated the pearl-merchant. 'Now the rest will go on of itself, for——'

'Where is that young lady?' interrupted the ex-corporal.

Carholt was allowed no time to reply, as a door opened and Thérèse tottered into the room. She was so pale and dishevelled that Grippe-Soleil had some trouble to recognise her; but she staggered up to him and gasped:

'I have seen all—I have faith in you—and I place myself under your protection.'

This was not the moment to question her, and the Spahi was about to take her thence without more ado, when Carholt forgot himself so far as to precipitate himself into the apartment just quitted by her. There needed no more to remind Bask-in-the-Sun that his uncle's fortune was haply concealed there; that was why the pearl-trader was in such haste. He hesitated a moment about letting him seek it without him, and immediately escorting the released prisoner home, but he considered she had nothing to fear with Baroda under lock and key, and that he might ask her to wait till he had finished supervising the dealer's searches. He took her by the hand, and she let him lead her to a sofa, where he made her sit down, and said:

'Give me ten minutes. The Singalese is locked up.'

'I know that,' she murmured. 'I will wait.'

She evidently had watched Baroda's incarceration from behind the pane in the door.

In his eagerness to search Carholt had omitted taking in a candle, and the hall lights very imperfectly illumined the interior of the library through the open door. Better advised, the soldier brought in a branch of lights and stood it on the table amongst the portfolios in the middle of the room. Notwithstanding the twilight, Carholt had already set to work, commencing by ferreting in the book-cases, opening each volume in turn, bending the backs over, and shaking them before tossing them pell-mell on the floor. He did not forget either, when he had emptied a shelf, to run his hand over the dusty wood. One would have said he had passed his life inventorying books. But so far this conscientious labour had produced no result, and Grippe-Soleil very strongly doubted that the search would eventuate in unveiling the valuables. What appearance was there of Chamboulive storing them in disgraceful books, which probably would be gone over before the equally as disgraceful hussies whom he invited to his revelry? Daubrac had had the idea, and emitted it on his first encounter with Caradoc at the Café du Helder, and Carholt had clung to it in desperation, from having found no trace of the treasure elsewhere, and concluding that it must be in the only room he had not visited.

'Won't you have me assist you?' demanded the soldier, not sharing his illusions, and eager to finish so as to return to poor Thérèse.

'No, thanks!' growled the other, down on his knees at the time, busy in foraging on the lowest shelf of the case he had all but emptied.

He rose, holding in both hands a folio large enough to hold a quire of bonds; he threw it on the table. The title shone on the cover in gold letters: 'Lives of the Twelve Cæsars, illustrated by their Medals.' The corporal at once remarked that, between the back and the case of this album of antique obscenity there was a hollow, out of which emerged the end of a leather roll. At the same time Carholt saw it, and the idea struck both that it might contain the fortune of Chamboulive. They doubted it no more when they perceived the folio had brass clasps, supplied with miniature but solid locks. It could not be opened without the key, and it would take much time to force it open; but it was not so difficult to extract the rolls, though it only came out a trifle on Grippe-Soleil's side.

'Pull away at it while I push the other end,' said the merchant, thrusting his finger into the hole.

Without any trouble the other drew a sort of music-case towards him. At the same instant Carholt yelled with pain, and quickly drew out his hand; around his wrist was twining a cobra, which had bitten him—the one Baroda had slipped into the room the night before by one of the holes in the door. He had intended to kill Thérèse, whom he no longer hoped to cajole; but cobras do not bite at command, and the horrible reptile had gone to creep into the first convenient hole. There it had gone to sleep until Carholt had the misfortune to touch and rouse it.

This cosmopolitan scoundrel showed, then, his mettle. A European would have called for a doctor and sought to stop the effects of the poison already coursing through his veins, and he would have lamented the cruelty of the fate dooming him thus to die.

Carholt, capable of any crimes, was resigned, like all Orientals, who never rebel against the inevitable, and die without complaint. With his left hand he grasped the serpent, tore it off from around his wrist, not without suffering two or three more bites, flung it on the floor, and crushed its head beneath his heel.

Seeing him reel, the soldier sprang forward to sustain him.

'Useless,' said Carholt, in a hoarse voice; 'I am a dead man. You have the portfolio—keep it, and save yourself.'

Bask-in-the-Sun had dropped the case on the table, and now he pulled his handkerchief out of his pocket and wound it up into a rope. He set to taking hold of the victim's arm to apply it as a tourniquet, and stop the venom before it got into the blood and ran to the heart.

'Away, I tell you!' cried out Carholt, drawing aloof. 'Try to discover Chamboulive's heirs, and do not share with Daubrac.'

He forced the portfolio into his hands, and, catching up one of the candles in the candelabra brought by Grippe-Soleil, he added:

'Begone, if you value your life!'

At the same time he clapped the flame to the light silk curtains, which flared up like a match.

'What are you about?' shouted the soldier.

'To avenge myself; Baroda shall be roasted!'

Despite the imminence of the danger, the other could not make up his mind to flee. A kind of admiration seized him for this freebooter, who was going to finish his career voluntarily like that King Sardanapalus, to whom Daubrac liked to compare

Chamboulive. The ex-Spahi wished to save him in spite of himself, forgetting it was impossible, from the cobra's bite being mortal.

But everything was alight in the library; torrents of black smoke spread into the hall, and the blaze drove the veteran outside. He recoiled, and saw Thérèse.

'I must think of her first,' he muttered.

He dragged her out of the hall by the doorway, which he had so fortunately left open, and he turned to bear succour to the hapless Carholt, if possible. But the smoke had come as far as the corridor, and he had to depart under pain of being smothered. He took the arm of the failing Thérèse, and upheld her in traversing the long corridor, followed by her to enter into the trap laid by the dealer in precious stones. At the end was the street, and the passage was free.

The clerks working in the offices had not yet perceived the fire. The escaping man would have called out to them, but he thought mainly of the woman whom he had miraculously snatched from death, and he felt he was bound above all else to complete his work by preserving her from the consequences of her terrible adventure. Not to leave connecting links with the accursed house, it was necessary to put it at a distance. No one had seen her enter, and none saw her go forth. At the same moment Carholt and Baroda would die, after having decoyed her there, bearing away to the fiery world, where they were due, the secret of their abominable design. What would be the good of showing Thérèse to subordinates, who were no better than their employer, no doubt, and who might accuse her and her rescuer of having fired the burning building?

CHAPTER XXII.

HER FIRST PRIVATION.

GRIPPE-SOLEIL chose his course rapidly. He stuffed the portfolio into his pocket, and said to the young woman:

'There's a cab-rank two hundred paces off. Are you game to march to it?'

'I will try,' was the reply.

'Then, come. Lean on me; I am going to escort you home. Is it far?'

'Boulevard Beaumarchais.'

'True, I had forgotten it.'

'Then you knew?'

'Of course. Do you not recognise me? I'm the man who, at the Jardin d'Acclimatation, had the unlucky obligingness to let you inside the Singalese Village.'

'I remember,' murmured Thérèse.

'I did it to be agreeable to my old captain.'

He felt her shudder on his arm.

'Haven't you seen him since?' he inquired, with an indifferent air.

'Not since the day he took me home. He promised to call or write.'

'And you never heard anything further from him? There's nothing astonishing in that, for he was laid up in bed for a whole week.'

'What, ill?'

'No; he fought a duel, and got run through the arm.'

'Wounded! Oh, heaven!'

'Not seriously. He was able to come out yesterday. But here are the cabs. Step in, madame,' said the soldier, opening the door of the head cab of the rank. 'I am going to see you to your own door, if you will allow me.'

'I beg you to do so, monsieur.'

He gave the address to the cabman, and took a seat beside the young lady. The next thing was to compel her to take a taste out of his pocket-pistol, not the best restorative to a famished woman, but perhaps better than nothing. He congratulated himself on having rescued her, but yet she only inspired a relative sympathy. He did not see very clearly into this abduction terminating with a tragedy, and he waited, before forming an opinion, for those explanations which she did not hasten to afford him.

Still under the shock of overwhelming emotions, Thérèse was in no state to begin a conversation, and particularly to keep it up. Besides, she would not have broached the subject dearest to her heart, for she did not know to what point the late showman of the Singalese was familiar with the love and intentions of Octave de Parentis. He had other reasons for keeping still, and the journey was silent up to the arrival on the main thoroughfare.

'They must believe you dead at your place,' said the veteran bluntly, for the sake of saying something.

'There is nobody there,' rejoined Thérèse. 'I live alone, and I cannot suppose anybody has been made uneasy by my absence.'

'But if it is only your house-portress, what will she think at seeing you come home, after two days away, with a man?'

'Whatever she likes. It's of no matter to me.'

'It will be better, though, for me to explain—not what really has happened; she wouldn't believe that; but some yarn I'll spin.'

'I thank you for your good intentions, monsieur; but so much trouble is needless. I no longer care for anything.'

'Not even for my captain's good opinion of you?'

'Why do you ask me that?'

'Because, of course, he is in love with you. Didn't you know it?'

'I do not know whether it was ever so or not; but I know he has forgotten me.'

'I do not believe so. The proof is that I am going this morning to tell him what has passed. I shall tell him the truth—at least, what I have seen, for I was not by when you were brought to the house by that rogue.'

'I was decoyed there. That man laid a snare for me!'

'I can well believe that, and so will my captain, when you talk to him about it.'

'I! What! would he come?'

'Why should he not come? if only to have news of you, and know if he were wrong to go out for you.'

'For me? Did he fight about me?'

'Rather! With a swell who had the cheek to use foul language about music-hall singers before him. Luckily, he's got off with a little blood-letting.'

'Do you assure me he is out of danger?'

At this juncture the cab stopped; they had arrived. On the step of a door, Grippe-Soleil spied a woman, who, on perceiving Thérèse, raised her arms heavenward, and ran up, screaming:

'Oh, Mamzelle Tercier!'

'Tercier!' repeated the soldier; 'who's that?'

'I,' answered Thérèse. 'That is my family name.'

The man was opening his mouth to gain further intelligence, when the woman rushed up, saying:

'So you have come at last! How lucky! I was just a-going to lay a complaint at the police station. Of course, you'll understand. They sent from the Ambassadeurs' Music-hall after you last night. I feared some misfortune had befallen you.'

'No, thank heaven!' murmured Thérèse.

'The young lady fell ill in the street,' struck in Bask-in-the-Sun. 'She was carried to a private hospital, where she remained two days unconscious. She is better now, and I was ordered to bring her home.'

This singular explanation surprised Thérèse as much as it did the portress, who shook her head. The singer was astonished at the care the Singalese showman took to cover her absence, however awkwardly, for he had evinced but little interest in her since he had delivered her. And he gazed on her now with extraordinary attention; his eyes devoured her, although he had hardly turned his head to his travelling companion in the vehicle.

'I am going to see her to her rooms,' he added, without consulting Thérèse, who did not like to say no.

No doubt the portress took him for some lover who had the right to act thus, for she suddenly ceased to question her, and discreetly glided back into the side passage whence she had come. The cavalier paid the coachman, and offered the lady his arm over the footway. He was not the same man, as she easily perceived, but she could not suspect the cause of the change. At the door of her lodge the concierge was awaiting her, having gone round.

'Your new maid went away last evening,' she said. 'Here is the key which she left me.'

The vocalist took it without a word, and went up the stairs, supported by the old soldier, who showed himself more and more attentive. With her he entered into the little suite of rooms where she had received the captain, and where no other man had ever been since that day. The furniture had been put back in place. She sank into an armchair, unable to go any farther.

Remaining erect, Grippe-Soleil said without any preamble:

'Then your father was a Tercier?'

'My father? I never knew him,' sighed she sadly. 'I bear my mother's name——'

'Which was——'

'Julie Tercier.'

Her hearer turned pale, and in an unsteady voice inquired:

'What's your age?'

'Nineteen. But what is my age to you?'

'You have lost your mother?'

'A year ago, at the end of a long illness.'

'Tell me—did she die of privation?'

'Not of privation, monsieur. By hard work my mother succeeded in earning, not ease, but the means of living humbly. She left me an income which put me above necessity—an investment in an assurance company——'

'Ah!' sighed Grippe-Soleil, as if relieved of a great weight.

'I repeat, monsieur,' said Thérèse, 'she did not die of poverty, but of sorrow.'

'Sorrow!'

'She never could be consoled at having been abandoned by the only man she ever loved——'

'Your father?'

'Yes, my father, who—I blush to say it—quitted her before I was born.'

'Did she ever speak to you of him.'

'Yes; on the eve of the day she died in my arms she told me his name.'

'With curses!' added the old soldier.

'No; she had forgiven him. She named him before she died only because she hoped still he would have returned to her, and that he would not deny me.'

'Did she never know what had become of him?'

'Never. He disappeared, and gave no sign of life. I have always believed he was dead.'

'Suppose I tell you that I knew him?'

You!'

'Yes, I; and that he always regretted what he had done. He was four thousand leagues from France—in Tonkin, that's where I saw him; and he charged me to seek your mother. When he went away, she was living at No. 67 in the Rue du Faubourg du Temple, where I went this morning, and found an old woman who remembered her, but could give me no further news.'

'Indeed? my mother lived there, she said, and was expelled. I was born in the hospital, and was out at nurse for five years at Villiers-le-Bel, near Paris. When my mother took me to her again, her position had changed. She was professor of music at a large boarding-school, where she had me educated on specially low terms. Afterwards she opened a school of vocal music, and had a good many pupils. We never were rich, but we never suffered privations.'

'Then, when she d-d-died——'

'Yes, then?'

'She was buried—properly?' tremblingly inquired the veteran, still burdened by the sinister predictions of the portress of No. 67.

'Do you suppose not? She reposes in Père Lachaise, in ground I bought for ever. I hope there to join her.'

'Would you let me g-go to pray on her g-g-grave?'

'Yes, if it be true you have been a friend of my father.'

Unable to contain himself any longer, Grippe-Soleil dropped on his knees, caught hold of

Thérèse's hand, and covered it with tears and kisses.

'What are you doing?' cried the young lady, bewildered.

'I am Jean Caradoc!' sobbed the ex-corporal of Spahis.

'What! you are——'

'Your father, who begs for your pardon! and hers who is no more! It was heaven that inspired me with the idea of returning to Paris.'

Thérèse did not withdraw her hand, but she did not respond to his outburst.

'What am I to do to prove to you that you are my child? Am I to show you the last letter your mother wrote me, on the eve of my departure? I have preserved it, and read it often over and over again.'

'But you never answered it.'

'Ask my captain why I have come back to France after twenty years.'

'M. de Parentis?' muttered Thérèse, still bewildered.

'Yes; M. de Parentis, who loves you, and whom I turned aside from loving you; for you do not know, you could not know. I believed I had been deceived, and I held all women in horror. I am unworthy of pity; but yet I am your father. Do not repulse me, I entreat you.'

'Rise,' said she. 'I believe you, and, in my mother's name, I forgive you.'

Caradoc caught her up in his arms, and hugged her so hard that she had some difficulty in getting out of so stifling an embrace. Poor Grippe-Soleil's position affected his head, from its novelty, and he did not know what he was saying or doing.

'You shall never leave me,' he said, trying to enclasp the miraculously recovered daughter.

Very much affected, too, Thérèse felt no such impulse, though she did not doubt Caradoc was her father; but she could not so quickly forget a painful past, and the future appeared more gloomy still.

What would become of her after her lamentable adventure? What kind of existence awaited her beside this father, whose name alone she knew as breathed by her dying mother? She had not been taught to love him, and the filial feeling springing up in her assuredly held less space than the memory of Octave de Parentis.

One word uttered by Caradoc revived an almost extinct hope, and yet she durst not question him. He may have divined what she thought of, for he warmly resumed:

'There is still time to repair the harm I did you. I will go and see my captain, and tell him all.'

'All?' repeated the uneasy woman.

'Yes; all that need be to show him you are worthy of him. I will tell him you were entrapped by villains, and were about to die rather than yield—if I had not delivered you. He will believe me, for I shall furnish proofs. He will believe me the sooner because I was heretofore against you.'

'He will believe you are defending your daughter,' said she, shaking her head.

'I need not tell him I am your father,' quickly replied Bask-in-the-Sun, who felt the force of that plea, and thought also that M. de Parentis would perhaps not be highly flattered at becoming the son-in-law of his former corporal.

He was going on to expose his projects, when he perceived his auditress was ready to sink. A little late, he remembered that she had taken nothing for two days, and she did not conceal her dying of hunger.

'Brute that I am!' said he, beating his brow.

He made but one bound to the door, and rushed down the stairs.

'Soup! bread! wine! Mdlle. Tercier is falling with exhaustion!' he roared to the concierge, who was reading the newspaper.

'Hem!' she sneered, without troubling herself to move. 'It seems they don't feed the patients in your private asylum! Do you take my lodge for an eating-house? Go to the next-door shop, old chap; there's a dairy where they sell cooked veal and eggs.'

Gripple-Soleil ran out without replying. Before marrying his daughter he would have to nourish her.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DAUBRAC'S BUDGET.

THERE are no two days alike. Since his coming to Paris Octave de Parentis had almost daily occasion to verify the truth of this proverb. Intending to rest and be merry, the captain had chanced to go to the Jardin d'Acclimatation to lounge on a Saturday, and he fell madly in love with a woman never seen before. Next day, the impression somewhat wearing off, he had almost quarrelled with an honest fellow who had served under his orders in Tonkin. The day after he had fought a duel with a gentleman of short acquaintance and received a good sword-thrust.

The rest of the week he had spent in bed with fluctuations of hope and despair about his cure for the wound and his heartache—now doubting Thérèse's virtue, and then resuming his belief in it.

On Saturday, his first day out, he learnt at the Ambassadeurs' concert that undoubtedly Thérèse was a joker who had let herself be carried off by a rich old man.

On Sunday he began to console himself with a dinner at the Café Anglais, where he paid for celebrated wines, which had not made him completely forget his adored, but had helped to dull his pangs.

And on Monday, to round off the cure, he planned a day in the country in jolly company. Savinien de Coulibœuf was charged with collecting some merry Corinthians to spend the afternoon in St. Germain Forest, where memories of the gay and gallant Henry IV. could not fail to inspirit the guests. At the club on Saturday evening Parentis, choosing a heroic remedy, had become reconciled with his cousin for all of his having published Thérèse's last escapade, whom he had seen next the pearl-merchant in his carriage after the rehearsal. Octave voluntarily endured the tiring society of this 'dude' as one submits to an antidote, and Coulibœuf desirably fulfilled the office of healer. Since he re-entered into the captain's favour, he never ceased orating against the prudes who don orange-flower garlands to deceive military simpletons, and the captain let him say on. He even felt a bitter pleasure in listening to the mockery in words of double meaning of the blockheads who believe in the humbug of actresses in quest of a husband, and he reproached himself for having been foolishly cheated by a pretty singer of a music-hall.

It had been settled the night before that Coulibœuf should call for him at the hotel at two o'clock, and bring the ladies in a specially hired vehicle.

Parentis had breakfasted with a good appetite, and was sipping his coffee on the terrace inside the hotel building whilst awaiting the starting hour. He no longer had to carry his arm in a sling, and felt no pain ; but he was not mirthful, for a man recovers from a sword-stroke sooner than from a heart-wound.

As everybody is aware, the Grand Hotel is a cosmopolitan house. Chinese and Hovas are lodged here, Moors, Persians, and Sandwich Islanders, to say nothing of Russian princes and Egyptian pashas. Those fond of hearing outlandish speech have only to sit out in the grand courtyard at certain hours ; they will be served to their heart's content, for all known and unknown tongues will buzz in their ears. They will furthermore have the pleasure of seeing processions of young English ladies, with their long fair hair down, and bevies of young American girls, as bold-seeming to French eyes as opera pages, flirting, but meaning nothing but marriage, mind you! with carefully combed and curled *rastaquouères*, or foreign adventurers.

The French are in the minority, particularly Parisians, who like neither the *table d'hôte*, nor the perpetual whirl of the caravanserai, where the travellers intermingle from the five parts of the globe. The life preferred by good Americans has not entered into French souls.

The captain readily fell into the way from having so long led the soldier's nomad life. As a camping-ground the Grand Hotel's courtyard was better than a shelter tent on the bank of a Tonkinese stream.

On this day he endeavoured to distract himself by contemplating the varied spectacle beneath his eyes, and he did not succeed badly when he perceived the General Marquis de Chèvreville crossing the court to go out upon the boulevards. Parentis had not seen him since the awkward scene which had abruptly interrupted the preliminaries of the duel, but, far from feeling any ill-will against him for his attitude on that occasion, he was glad to meet him to express his regrets for what had occurred. So he rose to go over to him, and the marquis received him most courteously, even carrying affability so far as to sit at the captain's table, where the coffee was finished, and accept a cigar.

'My dear Parentis,' he said affectionately, 'I heard you were well again, and I sincerely congratulate you.'

'Oh, quite well!' exclaimed the younger officer, understanding the allusion.

'The prick of the steel was nothing, but you were entering on a course which might have led you far. You perceived it in time. So all is well that ends well. I am delighted for your sake, and the army's, which I love as though I still were in it. The army, dear boy, is our true mistress, and if you had turned from her I am certain you would have bitterly deplored the freak.'

'I do believe so, general, and I vow to you that I no longer dream of sending in my resignation—however serious may have been my idea of doing it. I was as excited as a school-boy. But how could I help it—fresh from a country where there are no white women save the bearded cantinières? But the fit is passed.'

'That's all that's needed; and I am not astonished at your being caught by a pretty girl's bright eyes. It's happened me more than once, and I only wish the time would come again. Take your amusement, confound it all, while you are young, and profit by your leave to "go it," as I heard a song recommend in some Palais-Royal play. I am not the one to censure you for it; but, believe an old soldier, do not entangle yourself; and, above all, do not marry. Do like I did. If I had not remained a bachelor, I should have been shelved as a commandant only.'

'I shall follow your advice, general; it will not cost me much, for this silly adventure has much calmed me as regards the Parisian ladies.'

'So much the better. It appears, at any rate, that you hit on the wrong one. There is only one voice as regards that at the club. They all know the little lady; and your cousin Couliboeuf actually saw her——'

'He took care to tell me all about it, and I do not want to think of it any more.' interrupted the captain, with some ill-humour.

'I was wrong to rake it up again,' said the other quickly. 'Excuse me, dear fellow, and let's turn to another topic. I hope we shall see you at the club again?'

'Beyond doubt. I will confess, however, that I shall not feel the old pleasure in going back after this adventure.'

'Why so? I warrant you that no one will show the bad taste of alluding to what your friends regret, including your opponent, Chavigny, who desired me to express all the sympathy he entertains for you. You must not fall out with a decent fellow for a sword-thrust.'

'I haven't any grudge for him at all; but some of his friends do not please me.'

'Yes, I know; that little Baron de Teilleul—a butterfly of the same flight as your dear cousin. The two form a matched pair. Still, own that he was not wrong in refusing your seconds.'

'One was a very brave man, worth more than any Teilleul. I do not know the other.'

'Of course, not! I should think not! There appears no doubt that he is a money-lender's tout. Faith! anyone knows that out at the war, for want of a choice, a man may take a galley-slave for a second; but it's not the same thing in Paris.'

'Consequently, I roundly abused my old corporal for bringing me the fellow.'

'I suppose you have not seen the usurer's retriever since?'

'No; if ever I did meet him, I beg you to believe that he would not allow himself to address me, as I sent him off with a flea in his ear.'

'This is singular,' muttered the general between his teeth. 'Hang me if I don't seem to see this same man rambling about on the staircase!'

The captain looked and recognised Daubrac.

'Why, yes, it is he!' he ejaculated.

'It strikes me he is waiting till you are alone to speak to you.'

'It's I who will speak to him,' said Parentis, rising, 'and in a way that will remove any desire to begin again. You'll excuse me, general.'

'Certainly; and even want you to put down the rascal. But be prudent. It was too much to have him for a second; but to have him for your adversary would be even worse. And if he should force a quarrel on you——'

'He? Nonsense! I rather fancy he is coming to try to borrow some money.'

'In fact, that's very likely,' said the marquis, smiling. 'You will only have to refuse him it, and it will be a good means of getting rid of him for ever. Keep well, captain, till we meet at the club this evening.'

'Not this evening, general,' rejoined Parentis. 'I am going over to St. Germain to dine with these girls.'

'Bravo! I no longer doubt that you are radically cured. To-morrow, then, we meet again, and you can tell me about your country trip. It will make me young again.'

Having said which, M. de Chèvreville energetically shook the captain's hand, and stalked out of the enclosure, tightly buttoned up in his frock-coat, cocking his hat over his ear, and carrying a rose buttonhole, and his cane under his left arm. Parentis only waited for his departure to have done with Daubrac, who was promenading under the portico; and he went straight up to him. Daubrac met him half-way, and said, with a military salute:

'Excuse me, my captain, if I allow myself to disturb you; but the news I bring——'

'I am not your captain,' interrupted the officer; 'and I am not concerned by any news you have.'

'Yet it is about a lady in whom you are interested.'

'What are you meddling in?'

'Business that does not concern me, it's true; but I am certain you will be thankful to me if you'll but hear me. It will not take long. To begin with, let me tell you how I know you care for that vocalist——'

'Ah! you are going too far!' exclaimed the captain.

'You must not prevent me going to the end. It was Caradoc who mentioned her to me on the occasion of your duel, only he did not say much about it. But I was at the Ambassadeurs' Music-hall the night before last, where I saw you, and I guessed the rest; so I am fully informed.'

'You mean you dared to spy upon me!'

'Not the least in the world. I am working for our brave Caradoc, who wants to get hold of his uncle's fortune, to which he is sole heir. I know where it is, and I wish to hand it over to him. It is in the house of the man who stole away that poor Térèsa, and who is the cause of her death.'

'Her death!' repeated M. de Parentis, overwhelmed.

'Yes, monsieur; I come to tell you how it came about. I hope you will now consent to listen to me?'

'Speak, speak!'

'You heard the chatter about her at the Ambassadeurs, Saturday night, between some swells of your acquaintance. They related how Térèsa had gone off the night before with an old gentleman. It was true; but they did not know the gentleman, or how he had managed to induce her to go with him. He was not doing it on his own account, the sneak! but was hired by that Singalese who showed dancing snakes in the Jardin d'Acclimatation. I have discovered this. I rather would have discovered the fortune of that blackguard Chamboulive! Unfortunately, I arrived too late.'

Out of this incoherent speech, the hearer had retained but one item: Daubrac asserted that his beloved was dead, and promised he would explain how it happened. It was no longer proper to impose silence or to turn his back on him, and the captain took heed to do neither.

'In short,' continued Daubrac, 'the story runs thus: In Paris, the Singalese had a correspondent, one Carholt, calling himself a dealer in pearls, who undertook to bring him Térèsa in a house lately le to his partner, Chamboulive (Caradoc's uncle), and he did carry her off there. But the scheme failed. She fastened herself up in a room, and she would not open the door to the snake-charmer, charmed he never so beautifully with his flute.'

'How do you know this?'

'From seeing it with my own eyes. I must tell you that I have a lady friend who went more than once to festivals given by Chamboulive; the Coralie, of the Ambassadeurs. Well, the day before yesterday, on Saturday night, or, better, Sunday morning, I went on the search with her. We found the house, and went a bit in, where we surprised the Singalese guarding a door, behind which a woman was crying out for help, and Coralie most clearly recognised the voice of Térèsa. He did not spy us, and we came away. On getting out I went around the house, and perceived that it was in communication with the building where Carholt has offices, in the Rue du Mont Cenis. Then I understood all.'

'And you let matters stand there!'

'Not I! Yesterday, Sunday, I went to the Rue du Mont Cenis, with my plans made up. I had that old Lascar Carholt in my power, for I held his secret, and intended to force him to set the lady at liberty, and give me up the property of Chamboulive.'

'Well, well?'

'There was nobody there. The house had caught fire that same morning, and in two hours nothing but the walls remained. Carholt and the Singalese were roasted! Two rogues the less. And I can console myself for that loss; but a poor young girl, whose only blame was for having resisted those cut-throats! It's sad, it's sad!'

'What! she also?'

'Burnt with them! and the monetary securities! There's a fire which deprived Caradoc of three millions of francs. You do not seem to believe me. Read the morning papers; you will see that the conflagration totally destroyed a large building in the Rue Duhesme, and that it was with difficulty they saved the offices of a respectable merchant, who perished in the flames.'

'Nothing proves that the lady was not successful in escaping.'

'How could she save herself under lock and key? That gave me an idea that she set fire to the house to avenge herself on the Singalese, or to escape him. So thinks Coralie, who does not like her, but she tells me Térêsa was a girl who was steady to a fault. Her virtue has cost her dear—dearer still than poor Caradoc, who only loses his uncle's money. I am not speaking of myself, though I lose a handsome commission. Monsieur,' proceeded he, for the confounded Parentis dwelt silent, 'I see that I am causing you distress, but I believed I was bound to tell you the truth. I would have preferred Caradoc's communicating the bad news. I have been hunting after him last night and this morning without finding him He has not returned to his hotel. I met him yesterday morning on the boulevard, but then I did not know the house was burning with everybody in it. At last I decided on coming to let you know. I have done so, and I hope you are not offended.'

At this conclusion, the Parisian bowed with his hat off, and strutted out of the court less showily than the General Marquis de Chèvreville, but with a firm step, like a man who is satisfied at having accomplished his duty.

The captain was left to his anything but gay reflections. He did not know what to believe of the tale told by a man of whom he had doubts, and he wondered what interest he had in inventing it. It might be true, and, if so, Octave de Parentis had certainly his share of responsibility in the disaster. If he had kept the promise he made the hapless Thérèse to see her again instead of foolishly fighting for her and putting faith in the chatter of a flower-seller, she would not have fallen into the snare stretched by Baroda's accomplice. He bitterly reproached his carelessness, and at the same time blamed Bask-in-the-Sun for having left him without news of the woman. He forgot he had forbidden him to busy about her after the duel, and that poor Grippe-Soleil had never given him other than sound advice.

Now that Thérèse was dead, he found that he had never ceased to love her.

Strange contradiction of a heart as prompt to cool as to enflame, but always unreasonably impassioned.

The captain would have given his life to revive her whom he had adored and renounced, and he hoped that Daubrac had spoken falsely.

It came to his mind that Caradoc, as Chamboulive's heir, ought to be fully informed on Daubrac's attempt to recover the valuable papers. Perhaps the old soldier knew more than he, and questioning him would allow Parentis to discover the truth on the sequel of the tragedy which Daubrac pretended he had witnessed.

But where was he to find Caradoc?

The captain had not seen him these three days, and Daubrac asserted that he had not come home meanwhile. It was, no doubt, decreed that the Grand Hotel courtyard was to serve on this day as the stage for the final revelations, for, at the moment when the captain, oblivious of Savinien and his bona-robas, was going to the Hotel de la Providence, Grippe-Soleil almost ran into him under the colonnade.

CHAPTER XXIV.

DAUGHTER AND WIFE OF A SOLDIER.

'HERE you are!' cried Parentis, grasping his arm. 'That Daubrac fellow of yours has just gone out. Do you know what he came to tell me?'

The other shook his head.

'He came to tell me she is dead——'

'Who?'

'Dead—most cruel of all deaths!—burned alive in an infamous house where a scoundrel, paid by Baroda, had allured her. Dead!' repeated the captain, stifling a sob.

The old soldier need have spoken but one word to set him at ease; but he did not speak it, having his reasons for silence. Before telling the truth, he wished to learn what impression the misintelligence had made on the captain.

'How did Daubrac know this?' he inquired.

'He went to the Rue du Mont Cenis, and saw the house that was burned.'

'So did I go there yesterday.'

'And never came to tell me the dreadful misfortune.'

'I feared afflicting you.'

'Did you know that young woman was there?'

'The day before yesterday I saw Carholt, whom I suspected of having Baroda in hiding in his house, and he assured me on his gods that Baroda had gone to London. He lied, it appears, for the Indian was burned, along with Carholt—so his clerks say, whom I questioned.'

'What's the use of bothering about those two rogues! Daubrac asserts that they laid a trap for Thérèse, into which she fell, and they retained her by force.'

'I believe that.'

'But you're not sure?'

'I sought information at the music-hall where she sang, and learnt that Carholt was hanging about when she came out after rehearsal. He proposed a splendid engagement in London, and she had the imprudence to step into his carriage with him—and never was seen any more. It is clear that the scamp acted for Baroda, as I foresaw when the Singalese fled out of the Gardens; but the poor girl could not have dreamed of their being in concert.'

'So you do not suppose now she was only too enchanted at being run away with?'

'I never said so, captain! It is true, I had no high opinion of her; but I have changed it since I have made inquiries. She is a most honourable woman.'

'Why, when I thought of marrying her, you did all that in you lay to turn me from it!'

'But, thank heaven, you do not think that way now!'

'I should think of it more than ever, were she alive, for I have no other means of repairing the evil I have done her.'

'Were she alive? and since I know her story, I would perhaps not have the courage to speak against her. Still, marriage with an illegitimate girl, who has been on the music-hall stage—it's rough on a captain and a De Parentis!'

'Are you going to repeat your former croakings? You may dispense with them, since she is no more.'

'I fear so; but there's no proof. All I can say is, that, if she were here again, I would wish her with all my heart a husband worthy of her. I am not alluding to you, captain, because you come of a noble family, and are rich, and will become a general.'

'It is about time you made her eulogy!'

'I make it because she deserves one; and I can explain why I am doing her justice. I know what passed whilst she was shut up in that rookery with those two birds of prey, from a clerk whom Carholt had let into the secret of his rascalities. She resisted all threats, all offers—resolved to die of hunger rather than yield.'

'Could not this clerk tell you what became of her after the fire?'

'He was not there when it broke out. He is certain his master and Baroda were burned, for they have not been seen since. He does not deny she may have escaped, but it would be only by a miracle.'

'And the day of miracles is passed.'

'In short, if one happened to her, you still would not marry her, although I am sure you would be interested in her future. I am only a poor fellow, but I am attached to her, and will be happy to act the father to her. In that way, my life will have a purpose; but I cannot do her as much good as I have harm, for I contributed to separate you two.'

'No! it is I who am the greatly guilty one for believing in the slanders propagated against her by fools whom she had spurned. Oh, if I had only gone back to her, or even had only written!'

'You could not—you were wounded.'

'I might have sent you in my stead.'

'I had a good mind to go, but dared not. At that time, too, I was mistrustful of her as you were yourself—and as I am of all women. And why? because I fancied I had been deceived when I was a young man. I did not know what I learnt within these two days—that my old sweetheart had done nothing to blame herself for, but was always sorrowing for me, though I cowardly left her, and that she pined away. This is the cause of my liking better to be cheated a hundred times than to cast off a dear woman who behaves nicely to me—but I have passed the age when such things happen.'

'How did you learn this unhappy creature died?'

'Through a woman who saw her last moments,' replied Grippe-Soleil gravely. 'She uttered my name before expiring—she called me!'

'Perchance, Thérèse called me in the same way at the last gasp—and I was not at hand to defend her against those wretches.'

'You could not have saved her from the fire.'

'Well, then, I would have perished with her.'

'You must have loved her, I see.'

'Loved her! Look here, Grippe-Soleil! you have known me ten years—you saw me at Tonkin playing my life in the game of death every day, and tossing my heart to any petticoat that came along. You believe me incapable of truly loving—you are mistaken. I do not know how it is, but all of a sudden the light burst upon me! I felt an entirely new feeling arise within me.'

'Which blazed up, and went out like a fire of straw, captain!'

'That's true! so true that I have made it up with the scamps who insulted her, and I am at this moment awaiting my cousin, M. de Coulibœuf, to go dine at St. Germain with him and lewd women. You see that I am not making myself out better than I am—but I vow to you that they will have to amuse themselves without me.'

'Oh, captain, I know you have a good heart, and would not carouse the day after your beloved was burned to death, but—would you like me to tell you what lies deep in my bosom? I think it is a lucky thing she is dead, for with her alive all would have to be gone over anew. You would fall in love with her once more, and complete the turning of her head. She would make the best of it as before, but whatever she did it would not look well; and those pretty gentlemen would come up with their tales to tell you. You would believe only half, but that would be enough to chill you, and there would be nothing left poor Thérèse to do but throw herself in the river. As well a death by fire as water.'

'You have a very poor opinion of me.'

'No, captain. I am convinced you are in good faith now, but I believe you load up with too heavy a charge—let the word pass. Since you hear she is dead you no longer argue about her, but admit her having all the virtues. The sweethearts we lose, mind you, are like absent friends: we forget their flaws, and only remember the sparkle. When they come back it's another matter.'

'What's the use of your philosophical scraps when I shall never see her again?' sadly muttered the officer.

'Not a bit, I grant, captain. But, hang it all! I preach freely when I am full of my subject, and I have had such a hard test to go through. I, too, have lost the only woman who loved me, and since I heard of it, I have had time to think it over. I question myself whether I ought to regret her death. Who can tell if I would have made her happy after twenty years' separation?'

'Your case is not at all the same as mine.'

'No; yours is much more disquieting. You are ten years younger than me, captain, and the heart changes at your age.'

'I would you could put me to the proof.'

'Humph! if the proof failed, it would be at Thérèse's expense. I would not advise her to run the risk.'

'If she loved me as I loved her she would not ask your advice.'

'That's probable; but I should give it her all the same; and I would not be doing my duty unless I recommended her to be prudent. I hope she would listen to me, she has undergone so much for having loved you.'

'What do you know about it?' interposed the captain. 'I can't suppose she took you into her confidence.'

'Certainly not,' faltered Bask-in-the-Sun, 'but——'

'You don't know her. You only saw her once at the Jardin d'Acclimatation—you hardly exchanged more than a few words with her—but to hear you speak one would imagine she told you all her troubles.'

'Not on that day, assuredly.'

'Have you seen her since, to be so well informed?'

The ex-corporal much regretted having said so much, and hung his head without answer, although a man not ordinarily unhorsed thus easily.

'In that case she is living,' went on Parentis. 'Your Daubrac lied.'

'Not in announcing that the house where she was locked up was wholly consumed.'

'That may be, but you yourself remarked that nothing proves Thérèse perished in the fire.'

'Better if she had, perhaps.'

'Again you say it! Are you going to keep on saying that I do not know what I desire, and that I would change my feelings if I had the blessing of recovering her? Enough, I tell you! I never break my word, and, on my honour, I declare that I am ready to marry her. She lives, she lives, you mean?'

'She does, dear captain mine,' finally responded the old soldier; 'but she is no longer free to wed where she lists.'

'How's that? What are you saying?'

'She was doubly an orphan, but now she has a father.'

'A father!' exclaimed the captain.

'Yes,' said the other emphatically; 'a father—her own real father—who found her by a miracle.'

'I do not believe in them.'

'You must believe, however, that she was saved from the fire: I have seen her.'

'Living?—she is living?'

'In first-class health.'

'And you for an hour have been torturing me with your reticence! Why have you played this cruel trick?'

'Excuse me, captain. I wanted to know if you still thought of marrying Mdlle. Tercier; because, understand, if you told me you did not mean marriage, I would have preferred letting you believe she was dead.'

'Well, you know on what ground you stand now. I have given you my word of honour, and I am eager to carry out the pledge. But about this father—where does he spring from? She had none; she told me so.'

'Captain, there must be a father to everybody. Mdlle. Tercier bore her mother's name, because her father had not legally acknowledged her, and she believed him dead. But he had only to show himself; she did not deny him.'

'Did she forgive him for having cast off her mother?'

'Thank God, she did. He made it clear to her why he had gone away abruptly, and why he never sent any news. He was ignorant what had become of her mother. He was seeking her, without any suspicion that the poor woman was no more in this world, and had left him a daughter.'

'And she was content with his apologies? Well, she has a great deal of indulgence. It was really very kind of him to come back, after only twenty years, to claim his rights of paternity over a daughter he had never seen. This man is a scoundrel, whom she ought to have driven away.'

'You are right, captain; he is very guilty, but he has repented, and the vilest sinner who repents may receive mercy.'

'Is she sure it is her father? How could she recognise one she had never seen? Don't talk to me of the strawberry mark on the left arm—that's worn out.'

'He gave her particulars of his courtship, and the proofs. She had kept a letter of his to her mother; so he had only to write under Thérèse's eyes for her to see the hand was the same.'

'Good. How is he going to repair his wrongdoing?'

'On the margin of the entry of Thérèse Tercier's birth on the official register he will make the declaration that she is his child, as the law-form prescribes. If Julie Tercier still lived, he would have legitimatized her child by marrying her mother. Unfortunately, that cannot be, and Thérèse will only take a natural child's share in her father's property.'

'Property? Has he some? Is he rich?'

'Very; he has about three millions of francs.'

'Does she know that I am no longer astonished that she forgave him?' remarked the captain cynically.

'She does not even dream of it. He takes good care not to tell her.'

'What kind of man is he?'

'A poor fellow who has not sprung from Jove's thigh, as the saying is, and who long had poverty for a bedfellow. An inheritance befell him on which he never counted, and he especially rejoices over it because he can endower his daughter; but his fortune will never compensate him for his deficiencies. He comes from the ranks of the lowliest.'

'What does that matter if he does not have to blush for his birth?'

'Oh, his parents were honest folk, but not of your degree; and he has led a life of ups and downs.'

'What do you mean by that? Has he any crime on his conscience?'

'No, except the one you know: his abandoning the mother of his child. But you would not have such a one as father-in-law.'

'Why not? There's one thing gives me chagrin: his being so rich. He may believe I marry his daughter for the money.'

'He will know to the contrary, since you were going to wed her when she had no father and no money.'

'Then he will not oppose our union?'

'He will do whatever Thérèse wishes.'

'Ay; but what does Thérèse wish?'

'Who knows the longings of young girls?'

'You are killing me with your evasive answers.'

'Ask her yourself; she will reply to you plainly.'

'Can I present myself to her?'

'Whenever you please, captain. Safe and sound she came home to the Boulevard Beaumarchais; the little rooms you know of.'

'Will the father be by at our interview?'

'Probably; since he has recovered her he does not leave her.'

'Very well; I will at once go and ask him for his daughter's hand. Between ourselves, it is a formality I do not stand out for, as legally he has no authority over her.'

'Thérèse will be glad of your submitting to it. I repeat, captain, the decision rests with her.'

'Why, then, did you say previously that she did not consider herself free to choose?'

'That was to prepare you for the news I bore. I thought that the father's return might modify your intentions.'

'I am satisfied as long as he is not a dishonest man.'

'He has been a soldier.'

'If he has been in the army, and is a good-conduct man, I deem myself honoured in wedding his daughter. I am a soldier, too.'

'But you are a captain, and he never got beyond the non-commissioned officership.'

'It's all the same to me.'

'It is true, though, that he won the military medal.'

'Then how can you believe that I would hesitate to become his son-in-law? Why, I am proud of it!'

'Not so much as all that, if you knew him. However, if you exact it, he will give up the idea of recognising his daughter. She will gain by that, as he can then leave her the whole of his fortune, whilst, if he acknowledges her, the law opposes it. So it appears. A stupid law, but I did not make it.'

'Do you think his daughter would consent to remain what she is in order to have a little more money?'

'I will not answer for that.'

'I answer, no! But how are you so well informed? Has this father declared his intentions to you?'

'Yes, captain; he's my best friend.'

'Your best friend! How comes it you never mentioned him to me? I begin to believe you are jesting with me, from your partial confidence. Explain yourself clearly, hang it all! if you want me to understand you.'

'I dare not.'

'Dare not? I never knew you timid before.'

The veteran twirled his moustache instead of replying, till at last he had screwed up his courage to the point.

'Do you not notice a sort of a—kind of a—resemblance between us?' he got out in a choking voice.

At last Octave de Parentis comprehended.

'What,' he exclaimed, 'is Thérèse——'

'Captain, she's my daughter. It cuts me to the core to tell you so, but I do not want to deceive you. I hasten to add that I relieve you of your word of honour.'

'I will not accept it back,' said Parentis sharply.

'What! you would marry her! No, no, this is not possible! Think how I have been showman to those Singalese, and worn——'

He could not say 'the livery.'

'You have worn the soldier's uniform,' interrupted the officer; 'you still wear it, in token of which you have not removed the long-service medal won before the enemy. There are no shameful livelihoods if honest, and, my dear Caradoc, I will be your son if your daughter will have me.'

'Yes, captain. Oh, if you only knew how much she——'

'I do not want to know anything. Where is she?'

'Suppose I tell you she came as far as this with me in a cab, and is waiting for me on the boulevard——'

Come on, then!' cried Octave de Parentis, starting to rush out of the yard, and almost falling into the arms of his amiable cousin coming the other way.

'Ha!' he said, 'I hope I am punctual! I see you are ready dressed—capital! Thank me, old fellow! I have arranged a sweet little party which you will long sing the praises of. The three prettiest girls in Paris; and dresses! you shall see flaring ones! There they are before the door, in a handsome carriage, at three louis a day. Dazzling, captain! enough to knock you backwards. There's a crowd on the street to see them; but we must not get them mobbed. Come along, as fast as you can go.'

'Go to the devil, you and your drabs!' cried Parentis, pushing him aside to get by.

'Eh! are you dropping me? Here, I say, I call this deuced hard, don't you know! Do you think I can entertain the three princesses all by myself.'

The officer was already in the street, with the radiant veteran in the lockstep after him.

At the kerb was stationed the hired carriage, loaded with Jezebels, painted, perfumed, and plumed, not far from a cab in which a veiled lady was sitting well back. But the captain recognized her at first glance through the veil, and went directly to her, followed at a distance by Savinien, crying out:

'Where are you going? You are making a mistake! They're not in that mouldy "birdcage," but over here!'

Octave did not even condescend to turn to hush him. He presented himself, hat in hand, at the cab doorway, and said to Thérèse :

'Madame, you know that I love you. I have asked your hand in marriage of your father, who answered me that he left you free to accept or refuse. Will you be my wife?'

Thérèse threw up her veil, looked fixedly at the speaker, read in his eyes that he was sincere, and in a steady voice, without hesitation or any false notes, uttered the sacramental 'Yes.'

'Halloa! the little serio-singer of the Ambassadeurs'!' chuckled Savinien, who had sneaked up.

The captain wheeled round, caught him by the immaculate collar, and said :

'You have failed to show proper respect to Madame de Parentis. Do not let this occur again, or I shall crush you like a worm. Now go and join your jades awaiting you, and announce to your crew that I am going to be a married man.'

Whereupon he released his pitiable cousin, who crawled away moaning :

'Another man overboard!'

'No; a man saved from the mudholes of Paris!' muttered Corporal Bask-in-the-Sun.

THE END.

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